Ancestral Voices Digitalizing War: Robot Warriors at the Gates?

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Abstract

In the 21st century, the prospect of a radically different battlefield and home front looms. Robot soldiers will soon march into the fray, and "casualties" will go the way of cavalry charges. This is something to consider as a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, the idea that mechanized devices will have a decisive effect on warfare has always required cognitive dissonance. However, robot soldiers may magnify this gap in perception and inspire delusions of risk-free conflicts, or from a bleaker perspective, wars without end.

As the 21st century civilian population of the West rouses from the pipedreams of peace that, in a bizarre reversal of logic, the threat of nuclear annihilation inspired through the second half of the 20th century, the prospect of a radically different battlefield and home front looms. Robot soldiers will soon march into the fray, rather than children, siblings, or spouses. Terms such as "casualty," "P.O.W." and "M.I.A." will go the way of cavalry charges, carrier pigeons, and fixed bayonets. This is something to consider as a cultural phenomenon. Let us recall the *mentalité* that has brought us to the point where robot soldiers are necessary. They are being developed not only because we can produce such weapons (are they "weapons"?), but because decades of erosion of traditional cultural imperatives inform us that if robot soldiers did not exist, they would have to be invented. Complacency and wishful thinking about a new global order that has rendered continental wars obsolete is nothing new. The idea that mechanized devices will have a decisive effect on warfare whether they be dreadnoughts, tanks, or long-range bombers, has always required cognitive dissonance (Blackwell, 2021).

Robot soldiers will magnify this and create the possibility of risk-free conflicts, or from a bleaker perspective, there will be war without end. This is similar to the horrific delusion in August 1914 that the soldiers would be home before the leaves fell. The latter conclusion is also countered by the lessons of The Great War. The cost of munitions and machines became unsustainable. Catastrophically for humanity though, cognitive dissonance is omnipotent. Throughout the history of military technology, whether it be the "Greek fire" of the Byzantines or today's Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) the

next new weapon is invariably seen as the ultimate weapon. What could be more satisfying than the development of robot soldiers to salve civilian sensibilities? (Liu, 2015). However, faith in the invincibility bestowed by military technology is as irrational as the arrogance of the Teutonic talisman, "Gott mit uns."

Devices only succeed if the opponent lacks similar armament. The legend of the Dorians sweeping down from the north with their crudely wrought iron swords and spears that smashed the graceful bronze panoplies of the Achaeans resounds from antiquity. Millennia later, we still chase the chimera of weapons that will destroy the enemy while protecting us from them. Of course, there have been numerous wars since the atomic bombs that ended World War II, but no continental war has broken out since then and this has led to an uneasy optimism (Kaysen, 1990). In spite of the wars fought in the Balkans through the last decade of the 20th century, the Western consciousness accepted mutually assured destruction as a balm, as no "great power" would wage war, given the possibility of Armageddon. However, this was not the first time Europeans convinced themselves they would never go to war again. After Waterloo, the Congress of Vienna devised great power diplomacy that lulled the Continent into a sense of security that dismissed the Crimean War, the Russo-Turkish Wars, the wars for Italian and German unification, the Balkan wars, etc., as somehow "not counting."

The hubris of foreign ministries and chancelleries propagated this, and commentators of many stripes weighed in on the impossibility of wars between major powers. The decades before the First World War offer numerous pronouncements that war was neither economically advantageous nor was victory possible, given the reality of industrialized warfare (Motta, 1995). In 1899 Ivan Bloch's *Is War Now Impossible?* was distributed at the first international peace conference, The Hague Convention, in 1899. This was an abridged version of the six-volume original, *The War of the Future in its Technical, Economic and Political Relations* published the year before.

What is more, it was believed that international socialism would prevent the workers from taking up arms against their comrades (Callahan, 2004). In the popular historical imagination, if the great French socialist Jean Jaurès had not been assassinated, he could have prevented France from going to war (Tuchman, 1966). This ignores the reality of the French alliance with Russia, which doomed those countries as much as the mortal embrace of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Moreover, French politics and media had been manipulated by Russian agents for years into paranoia about German aggression—not to mention persistent revanchism (Long, 1962). Interestingly, in what is also the close of an era, contemporary American politics are bedeviled by accusations of similar Russian activities.

In the fin de siècle, economic and political theories were not quite part of public consciousness; however, one such work became an international best

seller in 1909 and was even revised and republished after The Great War. *The Great Illusion* by Norman Angell was translated into eleven languages and caused an international sensation. It crystalized the argument that modern was war economically unfeasible and was neither socially nor militarily sustainable. Unfortunately, since Angell was the editor of a rather sensationalist British newspaper, his alarm about the naval arms race between Great Britain and Germany was taken by the British leaders to be directed as a warning to the Germans: the British navy was invincible. The cognitive dissonance trumpets.

We know how catastrophically wrong such prognostications were. However, there is a contemporary social development rumbling beneath the higher-level discourse discounting future wars between major powers: conventional war is obsolete (Luttwak, 1995). This may be so, but the coming wars presumably fought by robots will soon have their own conventions. The term "war games" may soon have an entirely resonance; videogames may have altered perceptions of combat such that robot warfare seems unexceptional.

The influence of mechanized mobility on violence in European culture before the First World War reveals the desensitizing effect of new technology (Möser, 2003). The serious scholarly attention to the impact of mechanized speed on sensibilities contrasts with the concern that violence in film or even in comic books was inuring youth to savagery that has long been mocked by liberal humanists (Cawelti, 1975).

What of the decades of video games that digitalize mechanized violence? There is no consensus about this, but as we live increasingly in a virtual world, are questions about empathy the proper ones? In 1984, President Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" laser-beam fantasy, the Strategic Defense Initiative, prepared the public for what was to come. A few years later, television newscasts showed the Patriot missiles during Operation Desert Storm; it was like a video game lighting up the sky. Nobody appeared to be killed or injured. It was an ideal ideal follow-up. Or, was it the perfect prelude to drone warfare? Preparing the populace for robot soldiers continues apace. The United States Space Force, an actual military unit, came into being with the enactment of the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act.

Such cadres call to mind the "Terminator" films, which depict chilling scenes of robots slaughtering human beings in the near future. I would argue in reality, Americans do not imagine actual combat between human and robot soldiers. The delusion is that robot soldiers are desirable because they will prevent "real" casualties. Robots will fight with each other. This is military cognitive dissonance on the home front. Civilians know that drones are already widely used, but they may overlook that they mainly kill civilians. A military analyst refers to drones as "flying robots" and elaborates on the twisted perception of their use:

But let's be clear: Even though we may perceive of warfare as a (video) game, this doesn't mean that countries and people on the receiving end of these potent military tools feel the same. By some estimates, over 90% of those killed in drone strikes are civilians. (Buehler, 2016)

However, in the 21st century, a socially encompassing pastime amplifies the two-oceans-will-protect-us mindset that has succored the American public since the 18th century, in spite of the successful British invasion in The War of 1812. (Amnesia has always been a staple of the American political diet.) Certain videogames promote the idea that the United States must intervene to stop international forces of evil, and conversely by so doing this will prevent attacks on the homeland. Military videogames demonstrate a strategy of the Military-Industrial Complex to further the impression that war is now so technologized that America's high-tech prowess is the 21st century analogue for safety provided by the Atlantic and Pacific (Robinson 2015). Yet again, our machines will save us. Military robotics obviate pacifism.

We need to revisit the turn of the 20th century. In 1909, the same year that Angell's anti-war bestseller was published, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published *Il Manifesto del Futurismo* in Bologna. Translations in French, English, and Spanish rapidly followed. Marinetti celebrated war, speed, youth, machines, and the masses. I would argue that the Futurist Manifesto was not an *outré* provocation but a pragmatic recognition of the state of European culture. Five years later a German army burned down the University of Leuven library, destroying its irreplaceable medieval books and incunabula. However, the Germans were only taking a literal page from Marinetti who had declared that museums and libraries were but cemeteries and abattoirs of culture. Indeed, for over a hundred years, societies had been conditioned to accept that soldiers must be drilled to reject "the cultural restraints on violence and killing" (Möser, 2003). Civilians were acclimatized as well though. The motorcar, aeroplane, and speedboat were all part of reckless and dangerous activities identified as part of the social context for pre-war militarism. Opponents of high-speed risk taking were dismissed as "weaklings." Ernst Jünger's "new man" is inured to danger partly because

the closeness to death appears in connection with high speeds. Speed generates a form of sober drunkenness, and a flock of racing drivers, sitting like puppets at the wheel, gives an impression of the curious mixture of precision and danger. (Jünger 1932)

In the following decades the noted, if controversial, writer, Ernst Jünger developed his concept of total mobilization. By the 1940s he was arguing for the bomber pilot as the perfect representation of this—the fusion of man and machine as ideal weapon. This contrasts with the disembodiment of robotic

warfare. Now with advancements in robotics we may transcend mere combat fusion to achieve AI armamentarium. I would argue that the perpetual wars for perpetual peace (to use Gore Vidal's phrase) have exhausted the capacity for conventional of warfare and it is a psychosocial as much as a technological imperative that impels our drive toward robot soldiers. What is more as the speed and violence that was noted before World War I as preparation for industrialized carnage, so too is the phenomenon of the video game a preparation for remote controlled carnage (Royakkers and van Est, 2010).

Again, there is precedent for this. Long distance warfare has been a constant since the 20th century with aerial bombsights, artillery barrages, and long range missiles that wreak destruction from afar. The infamous Norden bombsight from World War II, bruited as giving bombardiers the ability to drop bombs down chimneys, offered no such pinpoint accuracy (Kratzer, 2012). Similarly, half a century later in the first Gulf War, America and its allies were assured that Patriot missiles were veritable anti-missile arrows that once launched automatically flew into their Scud targets and destroyed them, reality seems to be that Patriot missiles struck zero to one of their targets (Lewis and Postol, 2000).

Can we change categories in the Hegelian sense? Can we have "risk-free" warfare? (Gertz, 2018). Videogames and the persistence of popular delusions about robot soldiers would have it so. One hundred and sixteen years ago, the first Dreadnought battleship was launched. Like much of First World War combat, technology was out of step with strategy and tactics. It was also an illusionary weapon. England, Germany and Russia rushed to build new fleets. None of the dreadnoughts proved useful. The expense of building the new fleet drove the British to near bankruptcy. In some ways, their Empire never recovered from it. The German and especially the Russian armies were denied resources because of the construction of their massive fleets.

The industrialized warfare of The Great War also destroyed forever the traditional concepts of "glory" and "valor." The pomp and exultation of military parades have long vanished from popular consciousness. There are of course still displays of marching soldiery on holidays; dictatorships still flaunt their weaponry before massive crowds, but certainly in Western countries, there has been no blind rush to the colors ever since Wilfrid Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, or Emilio Lussu's *Un anno sull'Altipiano*, to name but a few examples. (Men did eagerly enlist in World War II, but this was a defense mechanism.) Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) sums up this absolute disillusionment:

> I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say

and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (184-85)

One must also note *Le Feu* by Henri Barbusse, first published in 1916, now cited as the first anti-war novel of World War I. However, it was originally written as a realistic amplification of French propaganda to reveal the truth about conditions at the front. It was only later taken up as anti-war literature. Its intent was closer to Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern*, which had no aim other than to describe the experiences of a German officer in combat. Nevertheless, the French novel became a landmark of antiwar literature. These accounts and others were detached from any sort of inspirational message. In Western societies, there is still sympathy for soldiers, ("Support Our Troops"), but since the Nuremberg Trials, Algeria, Vietnam, etc., heroism is not a donnèe. What is more, it has been so long since "brave boys in blue" marched off while bands played patriotic airs that the loss may be irrelevant. The "home front" is displaced because it no longer exists in an age of imminent robot combat.

"The paths of glory lead but to grave," but when soldiers themselves are *hors de combat* does the narrow gate of military ethics swing shut? If there is no such thing as heroism, is warfare finally shown for what it is, nothing more than mass murder? Yet if no humans are being killed, what is the cost beyond the material destruction of automated weapons? (Enemark, 2013). Can a robot be a war criminal? Critics of anthropocentrism may ask this question of the military, with the assumption that the act of war is criminal under any circumstances. The International Committee for Robot Arms Control confronts this, as do other organizations ("Killer Robots"). Robot soldiers differ from previous combat devices only in degree. What has changed is the capacity of the home front to accept consequences beyond its immediate circumstances. A century of cynicism about and disillusion with martial glory has hollowed out the concept of citizen soldiery. Videogamers who have grown up to be cubicled warriors are as disconnected from any carnage as civilians in their living rooms, who can instantly avoid any disturbing news by scrolling away from it on their smart phones. While in some corner of a foreign field a robot brigade of perfect soldiers is being programmed not to make reply, not to reason why, but to do and die.

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