

**Network Society, Network-Centric warfare and the State of  
Emergency**

*“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’  
in which we live is the rule.”  
(Benjamin, 1968, Illuminations, Agamben 55)*

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## **From Network Society to Network-Centric Warfare**

While George W. Bush gears America up for war and tells his country that the war it will be fighting will be like none it has fought before, US strategic analysts have already developed the key concept that will govern this war and the discourse that will characterise it. Persistent reference has already been made by the President to the kind of war that this will be. September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 witnessed the advent of network-centric warfare.

Recall that this war not only began with what strategic analysts call an asymmetric attack by members of a complex terrorist network. The destruction of the World Trade Centre on real time network TV was a strategic surprise attack on an even more complex network, global network society itself, of which the US is the epicentre. Knowledge based, globally linked through complex adaptive connections of every description, the terrorists exploited the very strategic strength of network society, its openness and connectivity, to send violent shock waves throughout the capillaries that channel its flows of image, information, technology, people and capital. The reverberations of the attack are still fanning out from ground zero in New York. We are only just beginning to appreciate how the shock waves will amplify the force of the attack as they course through the connectivities of network-society.

Some clue to the likely nature of the war that is already being waged is available from the new strategic discourse of network-centric warfare that the US strategic community developed during the 1990s. Under the US 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Re-organization Act, a Roles and Missions Commission must present a report to the Secretary of Defense every three years. The report issued by the commission in 1996 argued that a central mission to guide the US armed services was missing and urgently required to provide overall strategic cohesion and direction for the 21st century. The outcome was a document entitled Joint Vision 2010 (1996). This advocated a strategy of network-centric warfare, moving to more lethal military capabilities not simply by adopting the information and communication technology fuelling the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) more extensively and more intensively than hitherto, but by systematically utilising information as the generative principle of formation for all aspects of military organisation. A revised Joint Vision 2020, issued in May 2000, extended and embraced network-centric warfare as the principle of formation governing all US national strategy. It also raised the question of how the NATO alliance could be drawn into the evolving strategic web of network-centric thinking (Dillon and Reid, 2001).

Network-centric thinking is consciously modelled on fundamental changes that have taken place in the American and in the global economy. They draw their inspiration not simply from the revolution in information and communication technology and the molecular revolution in biology, but also from the confluence of the two. Here a convergence of thinking based on the overarching power of code is fuelling new ways of interpreting threat and of making war. Network operations are now claimed to deliver to the US military the same powerful advantages that they produced for American and global businesses. In network-centric warfare, information, speed, self-synchronisation and flexibility are said to be at a premium just as they are in the global economy. This new strategy is officially characterised by four themes.

1. The first is the shift in focus from the weapons platform – the battle tank, the aircraft carrier, the strategic bomber - to the information network, as the key military unit.
2. The second is a shift from individual military actors or units to radical relationality; from viewing actors as independent operators to viewing them as part of continuously adapting military systems operating in constantly changing battlespaces.
3. The third is a tendency towards interpreting the operations of complex adaptive military systems in biological terms. Like ‘natural’ organisms, military systems are now said to co-evolve and adapt ecologically through interaction with each other and the battlespace-as-ecosystem that they inhabit.
4. The fourth feature is the conviction that information is the prime mover in military as in every other aspect of human affairs, the basic constituent of all matter. This elevation of information does not simply open-up new enterprises for the military as it does for business - information warfare and digitised battlespaces for the military, e-commerce and so on for business. Neither does it mean that information is only a force multiplier, as the military say, increasing the fire-power and effectiveness of traditional weapon systems. Information has been embraced as the new principle of formation for all military systems, initiating a whole-scale re-thinking of the very basis of military organisation, doctrine, force requirements, procurement policies, training and operational concepts. Military formations no longer simply rally around the flag they form-up, mutate and change around information networks (Dillon and Reid, 2001; Dillon, 2002).

Network-centric warfare has also been stimulated of course by military self-interest as the US defence establishment sought new rationales for itself at the end of the Cold War. It also remains a controversial and contested strategic doctrine within the US strategic community. The platform specialists, the service advocates and the old geopolitical warriors, for whom weapon systems, states and territories remain the single most important elements of international politics, all contest its assumptions and loathe its new jargon. That is why we will witness a trial of strength between the traditionalists and the network warriors as the conflict proceeds, and why we will see an admixture of traditional geo-strategic and network-centric warfare. Indeed the vast expansion of the US defence budget recently announced by President Bush testifies to the continuing power of the warfare traditionalists. But it is the warfare revolutionaries who are leading the way in operations against 'The Terror'.

Many protagonists in this strategic debate also try to maintain that the revolution in information and communication technology has not caused much of a so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), or that it has only done so in the US. In one very limited sense these opponents of network-centric warfare and of the information revolution are correct. There has been no exclusive Revolution in Military Affairs. The RMA is the military face of the revolution in global affairs brought about in particular by the coincidence of the fall of the Soviet Union and the revolutionary digitalisation of information and communication technology. Suffice it to say then that the RMA is as much an exclusively American way of making war, as capitalism is an exclusively American way of making a living. Everybody practices it to one degree or another, most especially those who orchestrated the destruction of the World Trade Centre. For nothing was better designed to send such a powerful, threatening and radically disruptive message around the world's communication networks than the bloody spectacle engineered on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

Here, then, information has become the new metaphysic of power. To have a name and a strategic design for such a war tells us little however about how it was engendered, how it will progress and what transformations it will in turn effect. We have been told that it will be a different kind of war. We have been told that it will be very long. And we have been told that we will have to think differently about it. More than anything else we have been told that the very categories and distinctions that give us the old vocabulary of war do not hold here. We are in the midst of a radical dissolution of the markers of certainty that gave us all our old bearings in relation to war. Traditional forms of conquest, as well as traditional measures of national capability, land or raw materials, for

example, recede dramatically in significance under the dynamics of network-centric warfare. Territorial conquest and domination is not what network-centric warfare is about albeit traditional geo-strategic factors are still very much also in play, such as those concerning oil in the Caspian Basin. The object is not to seize territory or to free it, as in the Gulf War at the end of the last century. Network forces will not mobilise, march to the front or conduct mass frontal assaults or landings in order to defeat the enemy. More likely they will swarm. So think bees. Galvanised by information and intelligence garnered through the critical global infrastructures of surveillance and communication systems, network forces will swarm in combined arms and together with hired locals, gather and disperse in different volumes and formations, combinations and directions. The many theatres of this network-centric warfare will also be as virtual as geographic, coursing through the capillaries and conduits that comprise network society itself. Conflict will newly configure and exploit these spaces of encounter: re-routing, re-regulating and re-engineering them. The duration of hostilities threatens to be just as indeterminate as the new battlespace. The tempi of operations differently employed, modulated and orchestrated. Most problematic and disturbing of all however is the politically prominent issue of the friend/enemy distinction. Who is the enemy? What is the enemy? Where is the enemy? How does the discourse of infinite threat impact on the discourse of security that not only propels the war but that foundationally legitimates the political order that is committed to waging it?

All wars are fought to shape an inside in the process of contesting the outside. Network-centric warfare embraces this very logic since the principle of formation governing networks does not operate according to any simple inside/outside dichotomy. That is their point. They operate according to diverse and mutable principles of formation that effect changing complexes of fluid, multiple and adaptable connections. Their distinguishing characteristic is to have many diverse and overlapping intersections so as to facilitate the flow of business, capital, people, and information. The very power of a network, (formulated as Maxwell's Law) is directly proportional not to the differential between inside and outside but to the number of nodes a net can incorporate and the extent to which it remains open and adaptable to other nodes, networks and environing changes. Skilled deployment of the practices that effect the folds comprising the illusion of inside/outside, exploiting the very productive undecidability of them, is a skilled prized by network operators.

We are told then that the enemy is 'The Terror' (Simons and Benjamin, 2001). But no one can tell us what this particular terrorism is, how many terrorists there are and what resources are required to defeat

them. This threat defies the kind of definition that would allow us to know it, know its location, assess its strength and overwhelm it in the traditional ways of war. In the emerging discourse of network-centric war, terrorism becomes a hyperthreat. Not merely hyperbolic, threatening, to insert nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological dangers into the arteries and nodes of network society, 'The Terror' is a threat without definable referent. Bin Laden has become a simulacrum of the infinity of danger to which network society is exposed; a battlespace of infinite enmity and unlimited liability in a new kind of war without end.

### **The State of Emergency: Strategy, Power and Politics.**

On 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, then, the United States found itself subject to the recoil of the violence of globalisation. Declaring war on the terror to which New York had been subject, the Bush administration invoked a global state of emergency to wage infinite war on an indefinite enemy. Integral to this pursuit of unlimited liability to infinite threat is the figment of originary political innocence. The outcome has been a radical suspension of the law in order to save the law - Camp X-ray its exemplar – as if, shock horror, the law was never continuously re-inaugurated in this way (Agamben, 1999; Derrida, ).

Despite the novelties outlined above, How new is this phenomenon? What kind of strategy, what kind of power, what kind of politics is at work here? In one single most important respect the answer is that almost nothing is new. The strategic logic of modern power and politics remains the same, and the McCarthyism that attends them is equally familiar. The threshold of modernity where the life of the species came to be wagered on its defining political strategy was instituted long ago. Staking species survival on the success of that political strategy has been foundational to the political order of modernity since its emergence from the political and ideological revolutions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Governability, including the right to be governed rather than destroyed, became a function of a violent phenomenological reduction. Strip being of its world, or hypostasise it as so being. Call that a state of emergency, a state of exception or else a state of nature. John Locke, prosaically, called it America: 'In the beginning all the world was America'. Then, readmit being to being on condition of it meeting criteria adjudicated by the very authority instituted by this cardinal political manoeuvre. Not for the first time, also, does the operation of that strategy bequeath us a power politics driven to fuel the very danger security from which constitutes its original rationale. If the question of the 'we' is central to all political belonging, 'we' are those gathered politically by this manoeuvre and its associated risk; not, in the first instance of species extinction but of reduction to

species life valued only in as much as it provides raw material for orders of governance. 'We' are in turn those formed by the profoundly complicated political problematic of how, if at all, to re-formulate politics in ways that effect an exit from rather than another iteration of this terminal manoeuvre. A constantly cultivated innocence in respect of the operation of this strategy has repeatedly also to be lost in confrontation with the (un)deniable violence enacted by it.

Understood strategically, modern political power is comprised of techniques, and of principles of formation, that order the relationality and freedom of the life presupposed by it. The strategizing of relationality effected by modern power is the positive production of the subjects that enact power, together with the desires, ambitions and problematics that preoccupy them as subjects. Unlike modern legitimations of power, this analytic of the strategic character of modern power observes that it cannot radiate from a subjective intentionality prior to the strategic operation of power itself. Subjects no more precede the operation of power than power precedes the conduct of subjects. Together, power as a complex strategy of subjectification comprises the event of human freedom - as well as its denial - currently taking place in modern times.

Such strategising power presupposes and reproduces a life amenable to its sway: capable, that is, of bearing the ordering work of power itself. It is only in as much as it does so that strategising power becomes capable of continuously re-instituting itself. Sovereign power, for example, presupposes a form of life upon which the law can be inscribed, a life capable of reading and following the proscriptions and prescriptions of those inscriptions. Biopower presupposes a form of life subject to norms and capable of assimilating norms in the process of effecting its self-subjection. Strategically, however, such freedom becomes raw material for strategising techniques that ultimately honour it in terms only of its amenability to the strategic requirements of power itself.

While the social is the distribution of relations of power, their components and their functions, politics does not derive from the need to satisfy functional social needs, the division of the social into its component parts, or from the interplay of class and group interests characteristic of some social formation: "It is not common usefulness that founds the political community any more than confrontation or the forming of interests." (Rancière, 1998: 19). Just as politics is no regional ontology of a metropolitan metaphysics - it does not derive from some philosophically determined *arkhe* - neither is it an epiphenomenon of the social. The social then does not pre-exist the strategical ordering of power that brings it into existence as the social formation that it is (Lefort, 1993; Rancière, 1999). Nor is politics mere technique; strategic accounts of the

ordering of order concerned with "holding on to the exercise of majesty, the curacy of divinity, the command of armies and the management of interests." (Rancière, 1998: 17). What politicises strategical power, and what strategises politics, is a challenge to how the strategic operation of power institutes the *socius*. Politics is conflict over the generative principles of formation and strategic techniques that institute the social historically that simultaneously also contests the reduction of life to the mere stuff of strategy. Strategy becomes politicised when the form of life that it presupposes is contested by the subjects of it in the name of that undetermined and commonly shared freedom that power presupposes in its confinement of life.

### **The Convergence of Powers.**

*“The present enquiry concerns precisely...[the] hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power....**It can even be said that the production of the biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.** In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception”*  
(Agamben, 1998: 6, *emphasis in the original*)

We are indebted to Foucault amongst others then for at least two powerful insights into the strategic operation of power in the modern age. The first, that power is ordinarily experienced as a strategic formation operating in a productive net like way employing human freedom to shape historical manifestations of individual and collective life. The second, that political modernity is distinguished by a complex interplay of powers: biopolitical powers of individualisation, associated with the management of bodies and populations, and that totalising juridical power associated with the doctrine of sovereignty and the rise of the territorial state. The point of intersection where bio and geo-strategic power converge, as Giorgio Agamben shrewdly notes, is, ‘logically implicit in Foucault’s work,’ but somehow also remains, ‘a blind spot’...or rather something like a vanishing point that the different perspectival lines of Foucault’s enquiry...converge toward without reaching.’ (Agamben, 1998: 6). That convergence lies in the very strategical operation of power itself. In seeking to extend and realise the full range of Foucault’s strategic analytic of power, while exploring how modern power reduces politics to the continuous inauguration of what he calls bare life, Agamben teaches us how (Agamben, 1998).

Classically, Agamben points out, in the analysis and formulations of both Hobbes and Schmitt, the formal structure of sovereign power comprises an exclusion that is included as excluded. The exclusion is the

state of nature or the exception, that which is said to be outwith the law. In the process the very differentiation of inside/outside is instituted. Foucault might well have referred to this as a dividing practice. Agamben emphasises the following important features of this 'exclusion that is included as excluded' which constitutes the strategic manoeuvre that constitutes sovereign power.

First, what is excluded is reduced, cast out or cast aside. That is to say it is a-bandoned. Hence Agamben's formulation 'the ban of sovereignty' which contrast it with the contract of traditional contract theory. Second, in being excluded that which is cast out or cast aside is not severed of all relation with the power that in instituting this severance thereby brings itself into play; institutes itself. On the contrary, that which is excluded is manoeuvred by the very terms of this exclusion into a special relation with the power that comes into force by the very contrivance of the manoeuvre itself. That which is included-as-excluded is, "delivered over to its own separateness and at the same time consigned to the mercy," of the power that a-bandons it. (Agamben, 1998: 110). Hence, for Agamben, the, "the state is founded not as the expression of a social contract but as an untying" (p. 90). That untying is a reduction of life, a rendering of it down (and out) into the raw material for the strategising manoeuvres which constitute the exercise of sovereign power over it. Sovereign power is not the metaphysical centre of decision, the existential expression of a political identity differentiated from its alien other. Sovereign power is a stitch-up that institutes a certain kind of power relation; that between a life rendered down into utile material and those thus empowered to order and re-order that material ventriloquating its interests, goals, desires, needs, purposes identity.

Third, this is not of course a chronological event or sequence of events as posed for example by some readings of contract theory: "The state of nature," for example, is "a state of exception in which the city appears for an instant...*tanquam dissoluta*." What that means is that it appears as if it were in dissolution. The political order is considered as if it were dissolved in order to identify what constitutes and preserves as well as institutes it. The state of nature is thus, of course, "not a real epoch chronologically prior to the foundation of the city but a principle internal to the city, which appears at the moment the city is considered *tanquam dissoluta*." (Agamben, 1998: 105). The foundation of sovereign power in this manoeuvre is also, "not an event achieved once and for all but is continually operative in the civil state in the form of the sovereign decision." (Agamben, 1998: 109). This ensures the "survival of the state of nature at the very heart of the state." (Agamben, 1998: 106). In this sense the state of nature is something like a state of exception and sovereign power is the power in which, "it is permitted to kill without

committing homicide and without celebrating sacrifice.” (Agamben, 1998: 83). Similarly with the state of exception: “The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it. Here the state of exception is not the state of chaos that precedes order either. It is instead the situation that results from its suspension. This, too, is exclusion (suspension) by inclusion (operative) as excluded (suspended).

Properly speaking, then, the topology of sovereign power is not a space at all. It is a threshold. As such it does work. That work is not simply or even primarily, however, to command the domain of the inside of law and of order. Rather, it is to effect a passage between inside and outside, law and violence, *physis* and *nomos*. The state of exception and of nature are not so much a spatio-temporal suspension, therefore, as a complex topologising figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another. This is why Agamben characterises as, “the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence.” (Agamben, 1998: 32). He concludes: “the sovereign *nomos* is the principle that, joining law and violence, threatens them with indistinction.” (Agamben, 1998: 31).

Sovereign power and violence therefore opens a zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law, war and politics. “Since ‘there is no rule that is applicable to chaos’, chaos must first be included in the juridical order through the creation of indistinction between inside and outside, chaos and the normal situation.” (Agamben, 1998: 19). And yet sovereign power is precisely the power that maintains itself as deciding on these pairs to the very degree that sovereign power renders them indistinguishable from each other. (Agamben, 1998: 64). The violence exercised in the state of nature neither preserves nor simply posits law but rather “conserves it in suspension and posits it in excepting itself from it.” (Agamben, 1998: 64). It is for these reasons that Agamben characterises the law of sovereign power as “this ‘law beyond law to which we are abandoned’ that is the self-suppositional power of *nomos*.” (Agamben, 1998: 58). What applies in respect of Hobbes’ state of nature similarly applies in respect of Schmitt’s state of exception. It was of course on this basis that Schmitt formulated his classical definition of the political in terms of drawing the friend/enemy distinction. For Schmitt, too, sovereign is the power “which applies to the exception in no longer applying.” (Agamben, 1998: 46).

Sovereign power then is an act of differentiation and individuation that divides itself into “constituting power and constituted power and maintains itself in relation to both, positioning itself at their point of indistinction.” That is how and why all constitutions in establishing a constituted power simultaneously presuppose themselves also and

simultaneously as constituting power (Agamben, 1998: 40; Derrida, 1986; Honig, 1991; Dillon, 1992). Sovereign power - whether of the state, the nation, the people or the individual - is simultaneously posed then both, "on the violence that posits law and the violence that preserves it." (Agamben, 1998: 40).

Schmitt's state of exception, in particular, shows clearly that the link between the localisation and ordering constitutive of the *nomos* of the earth always implies a zone that is excluded from law. It is a zone that takes the form of, "a 'free and juridically empty space,' in which the sovereign power no longer knows the limits fixed by the *nomos* or the territorial order." (Agamben, 1998: 36). Similarly, neither is the state of nature truly external to *nomos* "but rather contains its virtuality." (Agamben, 1998: 35). In the classical age of the *Jus Europaeum*, this zone actually corresponded to the so-called 'New World.' That is why Locke was able to say that: "In the beginning all the world was America." (Agamben, 1998: 36).

"One of the paradoxes of the state of exception," Agamben notes, "lies in the fact that in the state of exception it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any remainder." (Agamben, 1998: 57) The work of sovereign power is to produce bare life. Bare life is life without remainder, specifically without the remains of anything that might dislocate the accounting of the conjunction of sovereign power and police in the order of governance. According to Agamben's analysis of the formal structure of sovereign power, "the exception is that which cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included." (Agamben, 1998:). Think 'Camp X-Ray'.

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