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Towards a renewed conceptualization of the war–society nexus: From events to frames

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Abstract

In an effort to contribute to the 'third wave' in the sociological study of war, as represented by Siniša Malešević and others, this article seeks to shed new light on the war–society nexus by proposing a synthetic theoretical framework and incorporating perspectives from East Asia. Drawing on the work of William Sewell Jr, it argues that war should be analysed as a historical event that transforms both material resources and cultural schemas. The article then introduces the concept of *war frames* as an analytical tool that synthesizes sociological frame analysis with Judith Butler's work on war. This concept allows us to examine not only how war is conducted, but also how it is socially constructed, justified and contested across different historical, political, social and cultural contexts. The framework is subsequently elaborated into a full-fledged analytical model and illustrated through selected cases of war in East Asia. The conclusion argues that sociology should 'bring war back in' by, on the one hand, incorporating war more systematically into various subfields of the discipline and, on the other, engaging more fully with non-Western historical experiences.

Keywords

East Asia, eventful sociology, sociology of war and violence, war frames, war studies

Introduction

It has been noted that, compared with other disciplines such as history, political science and international relations, the study of war remains relatively marginal within sociology (Malešević, 2025). Although scholars differ in their assessments of whether war has truly been 'overlooked' by sociologists, it is nonetheless clear that sociological interest

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in war has increased in recent decades (Joas, 2003; Joas & Knöbl, 2013; Malešević, 2010; Wimmer, 2014).

In reviewing the sociological study of war, we can roughly identify three waves of scholarship. The first wave can be traced back to the discipline's founding figures in the nineteenth century and their intellectual legacies up to World War II. During this period, sociologists – preoccupied with establishing the foundations of a newly emerging discipline – rarely treated war as a systematic object of sociological enquiry. For instance, neither Émile Durkheim nor Max Weber, the two major founding figures of sociology in France and Germany, respectively, placed war at the centre of their theoretical concerns. Georg Simmel, by contrast, took conflict more seriously in his efforts to theorize the fundamental forms of social life. Weber, meanwhile, emphasized the inevitability of value conflict in a disenchanted world, and his conceptualization of politics and the state later inspired important works in the next generation (see below).

In addition, there existed what Malešević (2010) terms a 'bellicose tradition' (p. 28), which can be found in scattered form in the works of authors such as Hintze (1975), Gumplowicz (1899), Oppenheimer (1914/2007), Rüstow (1980), Mosca (1939), Spencer (1971) and Sumner (1911), among others. Generally speaking, rather than treating war as a *sui generis* object of sociological enquiry, these authors tended either to approach war normatively – assessing its desirability or its consequences for the future of human society – or to analyse it instrumentally and strategically as a means of achieving political goals.

After WWII, a strong pacifist orientation emerged in sociology, reflecting the widespread desire for peace in the postwar period. As a result, the prewar bellicose tradition was largely ignored or downplayed, while the dominant paradigm of modernization theory further marginalized war as a central sociological concern. Against this backdrop, a second wave of scholarship emerged from the late 1970s onward, driven largely by neo-Weberian historical sociology. This wave is exemplified by the work of scholars such as Skocpol (1979), Giddens (1985), Mann (1986, 1988) and Tilly (1992). Premised on Weber's (1946/1958) classical conceptualization of the state as 'a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (p. 78), this body of work explored how war influences state formation, social revolutions and political institutions. Tilly's (1985) famous dictum, 'war made the state, and the state made war', encapsulates this approach, which predominantly viewed war as a driver of political and economic transformations such as state formation, nation-building, coercive capacity and resource accumulation. The Cold War sustained this paradigm through the lens of superpower rivalry, nuclear deterrence and militarized geopolitics. War remained a matter of grand strategy and institutional rivalry, even as sociological attention turned toward the broader consequences of military organization, national service and the political economy of the military-industrial complex. The focus of this wave was primarily on the war–state nexus, treating war mostly as an 'independent variable', so to speak. Although war had entered the scope of interest of sociology, war in itself did not constitute a widely accepted locus of enquiry.

The third wave of sociological study of war emerged after 2000, significantly influenced by the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and the September 11 attacks in 2001. Gravely unsettled by these brutal events, more sociologists started to pay attention to war and

violence and study it as a *sui generis* social fact in its own right. While some works can be seen as a continuation of the first wave (e.g. Mann, 2005, 2023; Wimmer, 2013), newer efforts sought to theorize war beyond state-centric models, incorporating perspectives from sociological theory, social psychology and theories of collective violence. From the perspective of social theory, Joas (2003) examines the intertwined relations between war and modernity, asserting that 'war is a field well worth researching, especially from a theoretical standpoint' (Joas & Knöbl, 2013, p. 5). Furthermore, Smith's (2005) work has made notable contributions to the field in that it opens up a new horizon for investigating the relations between war, state and civil society by refuting conventional research about war, which has been dominated by realist, rationalist or state-centred approaches. Kestnbaum (2009) identifies three key domains: mobilization into war, the treatment of enemies and the signification of war, arguing that the intersection of these domains holds great promise for future research. West and Matthewman (2016) further critique sociology's failure to appreciate the relationship between war, the military and civil society as a defining feature of modernity. They advocate for a 'strong program' in the sociology of war and the military, addressing the influence of organized state violence on social relations and breaking from approaches that narrowly analyse military institutions and warfare through material and political forces.

Among the scholarship in the third wave, Malešević's (2010, 2017, 2022) series of works represents one of the most ambitious attempts to re-centre sociology in the study of war and violence. Combining historical sociology, organizational theory and micro-sociological insights into solidarity and motivation, his groundbreaking efforts constitute an important advance beyond realist and psychological explanations. At the core of Malešević's project is an argument about the organizational and ideological deep structures that make large-scale violence possible. Modern wars, he contends, are neither expressions of innate aggression nor eruptions of primordial hatred; rather, they are the culmination of long-term historical processes involving bureaucratic capacity, ideological saturation and group cohesion. His multi-level model – linking macro processes of state formation to meso-level organizational structures and micro-level identity work – offers a powerful explanation for why modern societies are capable of sustaining mass violence. This sociological reorientation is a major contribution to the sociology of war and violence, in which the *war–state–society nexus*, to put it in Malešević's (2014) own terms, has become the locus of enquiry.

In the meantime, there has been growing interest in the sociological study of war among scholars in East Asia, particularly in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Two edited volumes, representing collective efforts by sociologists in the region, deserve particular attention. The first is *Conception of the Sociology of War: Institutions, Experiences, and Media* (Fukuma et al., 2013). Focusing primarily on Japan's historical experience during the Asia-Pacific War, this volume brings together research by Japanese historical sociologists on institutions, mass media and the lived experiences of both soldiers and civilians during and after the war. The second volume, *War and Society: Theory, History and Subjective Experience* (Wang, 2014a), reflects the collaborative work of sociologists in Taiwan. Compared to the first volume, its scope is both broader and deeper. Emphasizing both *war itself* and the *legacies of war*, this volume not only deals with the Asia-Pacific War and WWII, but also covers other significant conflicts such as the Chinese Civil War

and the Korean War. Several contributions further engage with war on a theoretical level, arguing that war is essential to understanding modernity in East Asia (see also Wang, 2018). These two volumes can be seen as pioneering efforts by East Asian sociologists to contribute to the sociological study of war based on their region's unique historical experiences. Since their publication, research in this area has continued to expand (e.g. Yoshino & Seki, 2016). In South Korea, sociologists have also produced important work on the experiences and legacies of the Korean War (D.-C. Kim, 2000; Ok & Kim, 2017). Unfortunately, due to language barriers, much of this scholarship remains relatively unknown in the West, limiting its influence in the broader international field.

In recent years, driven by a series of *events* – a concept to be elaborated later – in international affairs, such as the devastating wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as the looming threat of conflict across the Taiwan Strait (described by *The Economist* [2021] as 'the most dangerous place on earth'), scholars and intellectuals around the world, including sociologists, have shown growing concern about war. In an attempt to contribute to the scholarship of the ongoing 'third wave', this article seeks to shed new light on the war–society nexus by proposing a synthetic theoretical framework that incorporates perspectives from East Asia. Specifically, I begin by drawing on William Sewell's theory to argue that war should be analysed as a historical event that transforms both material resources and cultural schemas. I then introduce the concept of *war frames* as an analytical tool that synthesizes frame analysis in sociology with Judith Butler's work on war. This concept enables us to examine not only how war is conducted but also how it is socially constructed, justified and contested across different historical, political, social and cultural contexts. Finally, I elaborate this concept into a full-fledged model and illustrate its application through selected cases of war in East Asia.

War as a structure-transforming event

To develop a more comprehensive approach to the sociological study of war, I propose an event-based conceptualization of war inspired by Sewell's concept of historical events and his theory of the duality of structures (Sewell, 2005). According to Sewell (2005, p. 228), a historical event is '(1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures'. Judged by these criteria, not all wars qualify as historical events. Although most wars, insofar as being recognized as 'war', fulfil the first two criteria, it is easy to imagine that not all of them result in a durable transformation of structures. But here we need some cautious qualifications, because whether a happening results in a durable transformation of structures depends on the scope and the scale of the interest of our investigation. For instance, a small battle may not produce durable effects to transform social structures as a whole, but insofar as there are casualties or injuries, it may nonetheless generate durable effects that change the structural positions and/or dispositions of those thus involved – the families of fallen soldiers, disabled veterans with physical injuries or psychological damage (such as shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorder), the social networks or organizations, etc. Even if there are no casualties or injuries at all, the very experience of fighting on the battlefield may have left profound and durable imprints on those actively participating in the war. Therefore, depending on the scope and the scale

of our enquiry, almost all wars have the potential to be conceptualized and analysed as '(historical) events'.

In Sewell's view, an event becomes historical when it disrupts previously stable patterns of social life and creates new paths for future developments. Wars fit this definition because they frequently produce enduring structural transformations, reshaping political regimes, economic systems and cultural identities. For example, WWI not only redrew national boundaries but also led to the collapse of empires (the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian empires) and the rise of new political ideologies, such as communism and fascism. Likewise, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has already led to profound shifts in global geopolitics, European security structures and domestic political discourses in many countries.

If such a conceptualization is established, the next question follows: what structures are durably transformed by war? Again, Sewell's theory of structure is illuminating here. According to Sewell, structures have dual characters and should be defined as 'composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual' (Sewell, 2005, p. 136). In terms of resources, therefore, the structures that war may change and transform are many, ranging from lands, people and infrastructures to weapons, economic goods and monetary gains/losses. In terms of schemas, however, what kinds of structures may war transform? According to the duality of structures, schemas and resources coexist and depend on each other, because 'schemas are the effects of resources, just as resources are the effects of schemas' (p. 136). Furthermore, 'schemas not empowered or regenerated by resources would eventually be abandoned and forgotten, just as resources without cultural schemas to direct their use would eventually dissipate and decay' (p. 137).

Therefore, accompanying transformations in material resources, there is a corresponding shift in cultural schemas. In the case of war, territorial turnover signifies a redefinition of political boundaries, while the transfer of populations alters the composition of subjects or citizens within a polity. These are concrete manifestations often observed in processes of nation-building or inter-state conflicts. War, therefore, is not merely a sequence of violent confrontations, but a dynamic process that reconfigures societal structures in profound and enduring ways. Beyond material transformations, war reconstructs national identities, collective memory and ideological frameworks. It influences legal and moral norms, as evidenced by the emergence of the Geneva Conventions and international human rights laws in response to the atrocities of past conflicts. War also shapes media narratives and discourses on security, as exemplified by the US 'War on Terror' following 9/11, which redefined global perceptions of surveillance, terrorism and human rights (Blain & Blain, 2018).

Thus, war does not merely represent a breakdown of order; it actively reconfigures social, political, economic and cultural landscapes in ways that persist long after hostilities cease. This theoretical foundation paves the way for a new conceptualization of war, and this is where the cognitive dimension comes into play. While war transforms tangible resources and institutions, it also reshapes less visible yet equally consequential 'virtual schemas', which permeate a variety of social practices, including everyday life. I term these 'war frames' to highlight the cognitive dimension of war and its role in structuring perception, interpretation and action.

War frames: Primary and secondary

The term 'war frames' is directly inspired by Butler's (2009) *Frames of War*, but its analytical strength in this article is derived from Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* and its later elaboration in the literature of social movements (Benford, 1997; Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986).

According to Goffman (1974), the frame is defined as 'principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them' (pp. 10–11). In every society, there exist certain primary frameworks within which people try to 'make sense of what it is that is going on', since 'a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful' (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Such a frame is considered primary because the application of it is seen by those who apply it as not depending on or harking back to some prior or 'original' interpretation.

Frames, or frameworks, are essential to the understanding of individuals as agency, since 'social frameworks . . . provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being'. However, such an agency is by no means implacable, since 'it can be coaxed, flattered, affronted, and threatened. What it does can be described as "guided doings"' (Goffman, 1974, p. 22). On the collective level, frameworks are also crucial for understanding a particular group or a collective. As Goffman puts it:

> Taken all together, the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute *a central element of its culture*, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning principal classes of schemata, the relations of these classes to one another, and the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretive designs acknowledge to be loose in the world. One must try to form an image of a group's framework of frameworks – its belief system, its 'cosmology' – even though this is a domain that close students of contemporary social life have usually been happy to give over to others. (Goffman, 1974, p. 27, italics added)

Frames are not fixed; they can be keyed, rekeyed and fabricated. Drawing on the analogy of keying and rekeying in music, Goffman (1974) defines a *key* as 'the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else' (pp. 43–44). Among the examples that Goffman provides, a series of fighting actions among a group of people can be transformed from a 'real fight' to play through keying. The keying of frames can be seen as the transformation of frames, which also involves the process of framing (Snow et al., 1986), to be discussed later.

Applying Goffman's theory to the situation of fighting or armed conflicts, we may well say that there are war frames within which personal experiences of such conflicts are organized. To begin with, war frames can be conceptualized as the cognitive frameworks through which war is perceived, justified, conducted, experienced, remembered and interpreted. Judith Butler's conceptualization resembles this. In *Frames of War*, Butler uses the term to refer to 'the ways of selectively carving up experience as essential to the conduct of war'. As cognitive frames of recognition, frames of war 'do not merely

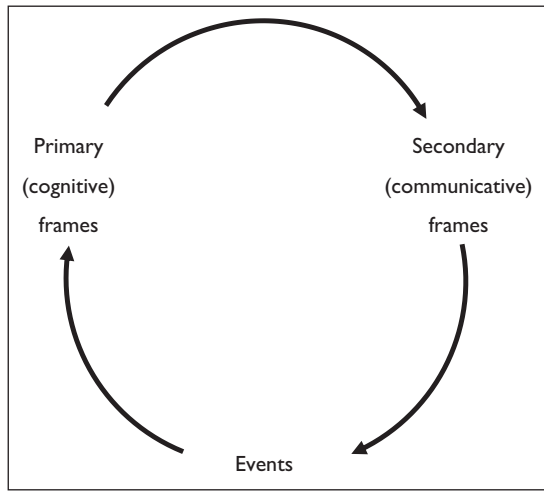

Figure 1. The hermeneutic circle of war frames.

reflect on the material conditions of war, but are essential to the perpetually crafted *animus* of that material reality' (Butler, 2009, p. 26).

Furthermore, war frames can be conceptualized as referring to the genesis of such frames. Here Foucault's insight, which locates war at the centre of modern history, is once again relevant and heuristic:

> It was precisely because it was waging a war that it was able to take war as an object, war being at once the starting point for the discourse, the condition of possibility for the emergence of a historical discourse, a frame of reference, and the object of that discourse. *War was both this discourse's starting point and what it was talking about*. (Foucault, 2003, p. 165, italics added)

Following Sewell's concept of historical events, war, as an event in which the highest degree of organized violence is employed, can transform the existing structures by creating new frames. Thus, we can distinguish between two layers of meanings of war frames: the frames created by war, which I call 'primary frames', and the frames about war, which I call 'secondary frames'. In the first layer, war speaks; in the second layer, war is spoken of. These two layers of primary and secondary frames constitute a kind of 'hermeneutic circle' (Ricœur, 1981): when war creates a frame for discourse, the discourse will further frame how war is talked about.

As represented in Figure 1, such a circle can turn into a spiral, as the escalation of war may further change the frame of war, which, in turn, can change the way that war is spoken of. Indeed, Goffman's concept of frames includes two types, which can be analysed on two different levels: the cognitive and the communicative (Sullivan, 2023). While primary frames here work on the cognitive level, secondary frames work on the communicative level. Thus, primary frames are mainly cognitive; they involve the recognition and perception of an event by various actors, such as the participants and the bystanders, as it unfolds. They do not exist prior to the event itself. For example, when a

plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the nature of the incident was unclear. It was initially interpreted as a tragic accident, and many people, including the witnesses, the reporters and the TV viewers, did not know how or why it had occurred. When the second plane struck the South Tower – broadcast live on television – viewers were horrified and began to suspect that it was not a mere accident but possibly an intentional act. The emerging primary frame became: America is under attack! Yet at this stage, questions remained: Who was responsible? What were their motives? As the third and fourth planes crashed in Pennsylvania and near the Pentagon, and as more information became available, a secondary frame emerged in the mind of the spectators: it was a coordinated terrorist attack! Some media even referred to it as a 'war'. In short, the primary frame involves the recognition of the event; the secondary frame involves its interpretation. While Goffman's frame analysis is grounded in interactionism, frames in his formulation are not reducible to actors or their intentions. Frames function as organizing principles that structure experience and interaction prior to conscious articulation. In conditions of war, such organizing principles are not authored by identifiable actors but are imposed by the event itself, shaping how diverse actors – political elites, institutions, media and ordinary participants – interpret and enact the situation. The analytical focus here is therefore not on identifying who 'creates' frames, but on how war operates as a frame-generating condition that structures interaction and discourse across heterogeneous actors. This will be further discussed in the following sections.

Just as in Foucault's (1978) characterization in which power is not only repressive but also productive, so war does not merely destroy and kill; it can also give birth to new things – including new subjects. By 'war can speak', I mean the very eruption of war can enable human agency – such as political leaders, cultural elites, ordinary people or even soldiers – to speak by creating a new frame; it can even give birth to new subjects to generate discourse of novel meanings. We can use wartime Japan as an example.

As soon as Japan launched the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, a new frame of war was created within which Japanese intellectuals and ordinary people alike worked out their inspirations. Takeuchi Yoshimi, for instance, wrote the (in)famous 'The Greater East Asian War and Our Determination (Manifesto)' immediately following the outbreak of the war. He stated:

> History has been created. The world has changed overnight. We have just witnessed it in front of our eyes. On December 8th, when the imperial edict of the declaration of war was made, the determination of Japanese nationals was flaming up. The moods have been refreshed. The history of nation-building flits in an instant, which has now become so self-evident that explanation is no longer needed. (Takeuchi, 1981, p. 294)

The outbreak of the war, as a historical event in Sewell's sense, created a framework within which Takeuchi and his Japanese contemporaries could understand 'what it is that is going on' during the war, which had not made much sense to him before the Pearl Harbor attack. Takeuchi went on to remark:

> There is not the slightest need for moral reflection upon the act of driving out the invaders from East Asia. Using the most drastic measures, we ought to cut down and cast away our enemies.

> We love our fatherland and, consequently, our neighboring countries. We believe in right, and we believe in force. The Greater East Asian War has brilliantly fulfilled the promise of the Shina Incident and has given it a place in world history. Now it falls upon us to fulfil the promise of the Greater East Asian War. (Takeuchi, 1981, p. 296)

For Takeuchi and his Japanese contemporaries, war became a starting point for a new discourse on history with implications for the current debate on security policy toward China, in particular over the consequences for Japan of a conflict with Taiwan (see in this monograph Jobin et al., 2026). We can thus see here both frameworks created by war (the primary frames), which serve as the discourse's starting point that conjures up new subjects (of Japanese nationals), and frames about war (the secondary frames), through which war is talked about by the newly born subjects. This conceptualization of war frames is similar to that of Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus*, from which Sewell's theory is derived, construed as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (p. 72). Similarly, we may well say that war frames are both 'framing' and 'framed' in that, on the one hand, war creates frames that structure the world, while, on the other hand, existing frames may structure the way in which war is perceived and conducted.[1]

Binary codes, polarization and ideology

In its rudimentary form, war is fought between two parties; war frames thus draw a variety of distinctions, primarily in dichotomous terms: we/Other, ally/enemy, winners/losers, victims/victimizers, defenders/aggressors, good/evil, pure/corrupt, sacred/profane, and so on. It is through such dichotomous frames that war conjures up new subjects, while these binary distinctions often form basic categories in primary frameworks within society. Such dichotomous frameworks, in turn, have further created or reinforced the binary codes that Alexander (2006) has keenly pointed out in civil society.[2] As such, war frames are essential to what Benedict Anderson calls the 'goodness/rightness of the nation'. Reflecting on those fallen on the battlefield, he keenly remarks:

> National Death has, so to speak, paid their bills and cleared their moral books. The National Dead are never killers. . . . One is invited to weep at the Vietnam War Memorial for the almost 60,000 Americans who died in Indochina, not for the three million and more men, women, and children in whose destruction each had his or her own small share. (Anderson, 1998, p. 363)

War frames form an obstruction to viewing things from the other side, or simply thinking outside of the frame.

It is clear that the war frames of the two fighting parties can only be contradictory to each other. What is valued as 'grievable' is 'non-grievable' to the other side. In warfare that involves multiple parties, the war frames of different parties can be aligned through alliance; conversely, they may diverge when the alliance ends. The 'united front' that communist revolutionaries were adept at manoeuvring is such an example. It also has to be noted that the same war can be labelled differently by the two sides. One of the most fundamental things that the frame of war does is naming. Behind different names stand

different frames. Thus, for example, when the 'Greater East Asia War' was renamed the 'Pacific War' in postwar Japan, the frame of war had been reversed. Similarly, the Russia–Ukraine war, referred to by Ukraine as 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine', is termed by Russia a 'special military operation', reflecting the frame on the Russian side that avoids even calling it a 'war' at all.[3]

As principles of organizing human experience, war frames are intertwined with ideology (Oliver & Johnston, 2000; Snow, 2004; Snow & Benford, 2000). In his seminal analysis of war and organized violence, Malešević (2010, 2017) has acutely pointed out the central role of ideology, or ideologization, in making war, but war frames are not to be confused with ideology. As shown in Figure 2 (to be discussed in a later section), primary frames (the cognitive frames) exist *before* ideology, whereas secondary frames (the communicative frames) enter the hermeneutic circle *after* ideology. Thus, at times, war frames are facilitated or constrained by existing ideologies, while, at other times, they can be further developed into an ideology of a certain kind through deliberate elaboration. In the former instance, war is framed; in the latter, war is framing. In the modern era, nationalism is the ideology most commonly associated with – indeed, construed through – war frames. To mobilize the masses to fight a war, political leaders evoke the spirit of the nation and call for civilians and non-civilians alike to die for its cause. This is what Renan (1882/1990) points out in his classic lecture 'What is a Nation?', observed throughout the history of nationalism. From the Napoleonic Wars to WWI, we find no shortage of such examples.[4]

What distinguishes war frames from other types of social frameworks is the fact that war involves certain fundamental – and existential – problems in human life. As the ultimate form of organized violence that entails killing, war inevitably involves the meanings of life and death. How does one make sense of the loss of life during war? How does one make sense of the catastrophic destruction and tremendous suffering that war brings about? How does one justify the use of violence, to the extent that one is entitled to kill others? On the other hand, how does one justify the act of sacrificing one's own life in battle? Whether killing or being killed, war frames imply a value system within which something is considered more valuable than life itself. Moreover, war engages feelings and emotions of high intensity insofar as it brings about damage and suffering on a large scale. This is especially the case in modern times when war involves more civilians than it ever did before (Kestnbaum, 2005).[5] It is at this point that Butler's conception of 'frames of war' as distinguishing lives between the 'grievable' and the 'non-grievable' is particularly relevant.

Memory, identity, institutionalization and dynamics of frames

As Butler (2009) puts it, through frames of war, 'we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured' (p. 1). Subsequently, 'there are "subjects" who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are "lives" that are not quite – or, indeed, are never – recognized as lives' (Butler, 2009, p. 4). In other words, by selectively carving up life experience to form subjectivity, war frames distinguish between

'the grievable' and the 'non-grievable', hence the distinction between the we-group and the Other-group.

Indeed, the distinction that war frames make is not limited to the grievable and the non-grievable. As principles of organizing experiences, frames are essential to the formation of memory and the construction of identity. Memory consists of fragmented traces of the records of the past; they can only make sense once a frame of reference has been established. In other words, frames provide memory with principles for organizing past experiences. By the same token, identity, which calls for someone or something to be identified with, can only be constructed after a frame, which draws the boundary between 'we' and the 'Other', has been established. The intensity of feeling created by war also helps to form and consolidate interpersonal or intra-group bonds among people who are on the same side of the frame of war. In the era of nationalism, war frames thereby provide primary frameworks for members of the nation-state within which to form memory and identity.

Although war frames exist behind virtually every nation-state, their visibility varies significantly from one to another. Not all members of the society (presumably a nation-state) subscribe to the dominant frame of war; there can be competing frames, as well as group(s) within the society who intend to shatter the dominant war frames, as some pacifists do.

War frames can be applied to other, seemingly 'non-war' situations. Elaborating on multiple meanings of the expression 'to be framed' (such as 'a picture is framed' and 'someone is framed'), Butler (2009) goes on to argue that 'there are several frames at issue here: the frame of the photograph, the framing of the decision to go to war, the framing of immigration issues as a "war at home," and the framing of sexual and feminist politics in the service of the war effort' (p. 26). Here, Butler has in fact shifted the focus by applying war frames to other theatres, such as sexual and feminist politics, and immigration issues as a 'war at home'. This is another sense in which Foucault's reversal of Clausewitz's thesis is meaningful, as politics of other kinds (namely, politics not directly related to sovereignty and/or state power) are likewise a continuation of war by other means. This will be further elaborated in the concluding section.

War frames also evolve as war unfolds in different phases. New frames may emerge, while old frames may be reinforced, modified or overthrown. Furthermore, the outcome of war may change the pre-existing frames. Victors and losers tend to make sense of the outcome in different ways. In some cases, the frame of war on the losing side may be destroyed by the victors as a result of the war. The war frames of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, for instance, are the kinds of frames that were intentionally demolished after WWII. As in Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, the victors' war frames can become the dominant frameworks of reference after the end of war.

War frames do not necessarily disappear with the end of war. Once the war has ended, the war frames can remain and persist – they are, like other social frameworks analysed by Goffman, subject to keying, rekeying and fabrication, too. Specifically, war frames may be preserved, (re)keyed and fabricated through a variety of media and institutions such as archives, memoirs, textbooks, plays, films, TV dramas, museums, rituals and ceremonies. This can be seen as the institutionalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) or typification (Schütz, 1962) of war frames. As such, war frames are neither always visible

nor self-evident. Once institutionalized, they work quietly, unnoticed and un-reflected upon, like the unnoticed flag of 'banal nationalism' in daily life.[6] War frames can be re-erected and revitalized to make sense of a situation that is not immediately associated with war (such as sports games). As pointed out above, war frames may further create binary cultural codes in civil discourse that provide 'the skeletal structures on which social communities build the familiar stories, the rich narrative forms, that guide their everyday, taken-for-granted political life' (Alexander, 2006, p. 60). What is more, such civil discourse further affects people's perception of war and even the decision to go to war (Smith, 2005), which, again, leads to the reproduction of war frames in our daily routines.

To synthesize the preceding discussion, war should be conceptualized as a historical event that transforms both material resources and cultural schemas, fundamentally reshaping the individuals and societies involved. The analytical concept of *war frames* provides a lens through which to understand these transformations and can be divided into two interrelated layers. First, *primary war frames* emerge directly from the war itself, generating new subjectivities and redefining social, political and cultural boundaries. These frames, by demarcating insiders/outsiders and friends/foes, determine how individuals and groups are positioned in the wartime and postwar orders, shaping their identities, roles and lived experiences. Second, *secondary war frames* involve the ways in which wars are interpreted, justified and remembered. These frames shape public perception, political discourse and historical narratives, determining which lives are grieved or erased and how violence is legitimized or contested. Together, primary and secondary frames shape not only how war is understood but also how societies respond to it and its legacies. They conjure up different subjects, shaping divergent worldviews, and lead to different actions and coping strategies for those affected.

In the following section, I develop a full-fledged model and illustrate it using cases of war in East Asia, supplemented by additional insights from the Russia–Ukraine war. The aim is not to offer an exhaustive analysis, but rather to demonstrate how wars – as events – have fundamentally reshaped geopolitical configurations and socio-cultural landscapes in the region, and how wars – as frames – have continued to influence collective thinking and worldviews to this day.

Wars as events and frames in action: a full-fledged model

Unlike Europe, which lamented the 'return of war' following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Delanty, 2023), war has never fully receded from East Asia. The post-World War II settlements in the region remain incomplete, leaving behind enduring tensions and unresolved disputes. As I have pointed out in previous publications (Wang, 2014b, 2018), war frames have played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of nationalism in East Asia – a process that continues today. Indeed, war is central to understanding the trajectories of modernity in the region. Both China and Japan – the two dominant powers of East Asia's modern history – encountered, experienced and ultimately pursued modernity through successive wars. Since the late nineteenth century, both nations have engaged in multiple armed conflicts, with the two Sino-Japanese Wars being particularly consequential. Yet the meanings and implications of these wars diverged significantly

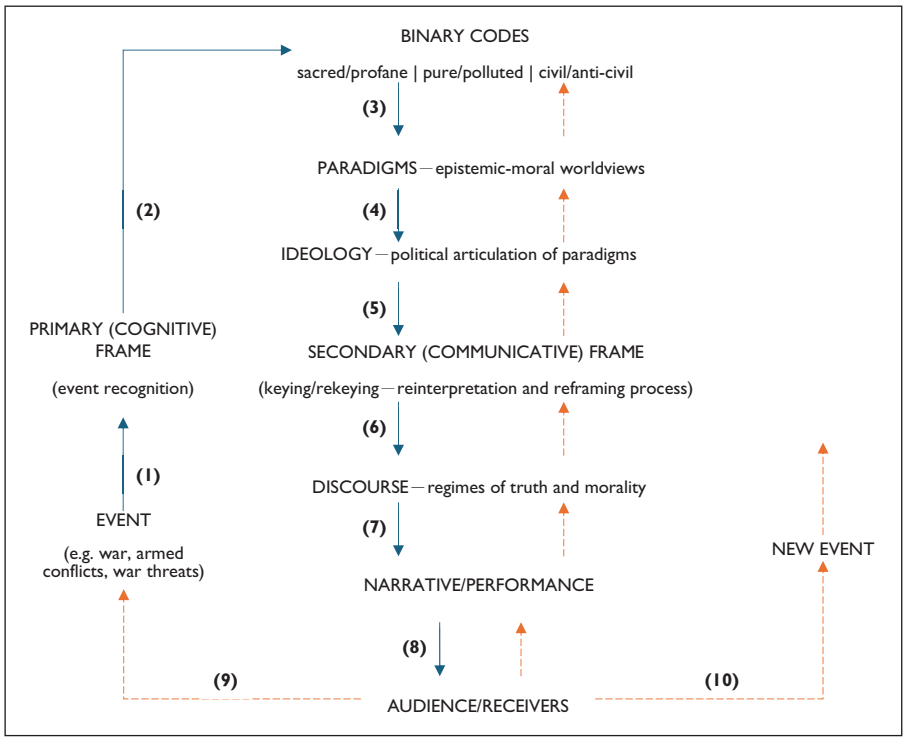

Figure 2. War as an event and as frames: a full-fledged model.

between the two sides. The formation and eventual consolidation of war frames in these contexts have evolved over more than a century.

Figure 2 develops a full-fledged model that visualizes war both as an event and as a framing device. To demonstrate how war can function as both the framer and the framed, I take East Asia as an illustrative case.

Among the many conflicts in modern East Asia, four wars stand out as particularly consequential: the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Second Sino-Japanese War and WWII (1937–1945), the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) and the Korean War (1950–1953). While each of these wars reshaped the region's political structures and socio-cultural landscapes in distinct ways, they should not be understood as isolated events. Rather, they are historically nested and causally intertwined in both their origins and consequences (Paine, 2012). Since the purpose here is not to analyse each case in detail, but to use them heuristically to illustrate the analytical model presented in Figure 2, many historical nuances and complexities will necessarily be set aside. The following discussion proceeds in the order indicated by the numbered arrows in the figure.

To begin with, when a war occurs, it creates a frame **(1)**: *us* versus *them* – the enemy. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, for instance, a frame emerged: Japan versus the United States. Prior to the war, this frame did not exist. This is how war *frames* by

producing divisions that were not previously present. The antagonism between China and Japan, as observed today, did not exist before the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894, when the Japanese Empire defeated the Qing Dynasty and annexed Taiwan as its first colony. Similarly, the current antagonism between Taiwan and China can be traced back to the Second Sino-Japanese War, during which Taiwan – then under Japanese rule – was incorporated into and mobilized by the Japanese Empire to fight the Allies, including China. This antagonism was further intensified after 1949, when the Kuomintang (KMT) regime under Chiang Kai-shek lost the Chinese Civil War to Mao Zedong and retreated to Taiwan. The resulting rivalry across the Taiwan Strait has continued ever since. Likewise, it was the frame created by the Korean War – together with its unresolved outcome (an armistice) – that gave rise to the two political entities now known as North and South Korea (see M. Kim & Jin, 2026, in this monograph).

Second, the frame then feeds into the binary codes of society **(2)**, which are essential for the production of meaning and the maintenance of moral order (Alexander, 2006). At this stage, distinctions are drawn between friend and foe, just and unjust, good and evil, sacred and profane, grievable and non-grievable (Butler, 2009), and so forth. Dehumanization, a common feature of warfare, typically emerges at this point. During WWII, for example, China depicted the Japanese as 'devils', while the Japanese referred to Americans and the British as 'devilish animals'. It is through such binary codes that war acquires moral significance, and killing becomes justified – since certain lives are deemed less valuable than others.

Thirdly, the next level is *paradigm* **(3)**, a term borrowed from Kuhn (1962), which I use to refer to an epistemic-moral worldview. Different paradigms generate distinct understandings of the world – sometimes incommensurable, to use another Kuhnian term – such that they effectively inhabit different 'realities'. Taiwan offers a useful example. Some adopt a *China-centred* worldview, which interprets the world through the lens of Chinese culture and history; in this view, Taiwan is merely a part of China. Others embrace a *Taiwan-centred* worldview, which regards Taiwanese history and culture as autonomous and not subordinate to China. Accordingly, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII, the China paradigm emphasizes victory, while the Taiwan paradigm recalls defeat – as experienced by Taiwanese under Japanese rule. These paradigms generate contradictory interpretations of both past and present, and they lead to divergent visions of the future. Paradigms differ from ideologies in that they are not necessarily political, whereas ideologies are inherently political.

The fourth level is *ideology* **(4)**, which refers to the political articulation of different paradigmatic worldviews. Nationalism is a typical example. The KMT historically promoted Chinese nationalism, advocating for Taiwan's unification with China. In contrast, Taiwanese nationalism – aligned with the Taiwan paradigm – asserts that Taiwan should become an independent state (see Wenger et al., 2026, in this monograph). However, nationalism is not the only ideology implicated in war. Other ideologies – such as imperialism, colonialism, communism, fascism, and even liberalism – can also be associated with warfare, each justifying violence in different ways and under different guises.

Next, these ideologies give rise to secondary frames (or communicative frames), through which war is interpreted, narrated and circulated. This is how war is *framed* by

different carrier groups of ideology, to put it in Weber's terms, embedded within specific discourses and narratives **(5, 6, 7)**. A contemporary example is the Russia–Ukraine war: when Russian troops entered Ukraine and armed conflict broke out on 24 February 2022, a new primary frame – Russia versus Ukraine – was established. In the secondary frame, however, Russian officials avoided labelling it a 'war', instead referring to it as a 'special military operation'. For Ukrainians, by contrast, it was unequivocally a military invasion that violated territorial sovereignty and thus constituted an act of war (see Kutsenko & Kostiuchenko, 2026, in this monograph).

Furthermore, secondary war frames can also be applied to past wars or projected onto potential future conflicts. For instance, in commemorating WWII, Chinese nationalism emphasizes the narrative of the War of Resistance Against Japan, whereas Taiwanese nationalism highlights the memories of Taiwanese soldiers who fought in Southeast Asia under the Japanese army, or the collective memory of listening to Emperor Hirohito's surrender broadcast. This was notably re-enacted in 2015, when Taiwanese nationalists commemorated the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII – a political performance enacted through narrative (Wang, 2025). In the context of potential future warfare, the KMT frames the escalating military threat from the PRC as a continuation of the Chinese Civil War. In contrast, the DPP challenges this view by framing it as external aggression or attempted annexation: a possible war over the Taiwan Strait would constitute a conflict between two sovereign states rather than a civil war (see K.-J. J. Lin & Chen, 2026). Different frames lead to different coping strategies, and international responses may likewise vary depending on the frame adopted.

Moreover, the discourses, narratives and performances articulated through secondary frames eventually reach their audiences or the general public **(8)**, generating responses that may feed back into the narratives, discourses, secondary frames, and even the underlying ideology. Such feedback does not always occur, but when it does, its intensity can vary – ranging from weak to strong depending on the context. In some cases, these reactions may feed back into the unfolding event itself **(9)**, prompting, for example, individuals to join the fight. Reactions may also give rise to new actions distinct from the original event **(10)**, such as the emergence of a new conflict or the signing of a peace treaty. In this way, a new cycle begins.

Regarding agency, different human actors participate at different stages of the process. However, agency does not emerge from a social vacuum; it is both enabled and constrained by existing structures (Sewell, 2005, pp. 143–145). When war breaks out, agency is distributed across the entire chain of command – from the leaders who initiate the war to the soldiers who fight on the battlefield. In addition, many carrier groups also participate in the framing process, including intellectuals, political elites, activists, and even denigrated or marginalized classes with material and/or ideal interests in it (Alexander, 2012, p. 16).

Thus, just as war is a dynamic process, so too is framing and being framed. Different agents may participate at different stages, and outcomes are contingent on numerous contextual factors. Regardless of how determined one may be to win a war, the outcome is ultimately unpredictable. Because war often produces unforeseen consequences, its results frequently exceed the expectations of participants before or during the conflict. The outcomes of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War and the Korean

War all produced unintended consequences and enduring legacies that continue to shape societies in the region (M. Kim & Jin, 2026; H.-T. Lin, 2016; Paine, 2012).

Moreover, war can also give rise to new forms of agency. Taiwan presents an atypical but compelling example. Although Taiwan has never fought a war as a subject in its own right, the outcomes of earlier wars – and their unresolved legacies – have shaped its emergence as a significant actor, not only within global supply chains, but also in regional geopolitics and great-power rivalry.

The model illustrated in Figure 2 can help explain a wide range of phenomena – whether directly related to war or not – across past, present and future contexts. It provides a framework for understanding how war, along with its legacies, profoundly transforms societies in ways that are not yet fully recognized. In the case of the four East Asian wars discussed in this section, we can identify war frames held by those involved and examine how these frames have operated from the past to the present. For example, dominant war frames in China are rooted in the period from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, encompassing the two Sino-Japanese Wars and the Liberation War (Paine, 2002, 2012; Van de Ven, 2017). Within this framework, the so-called 'Taiwan problem' is perceived as a historical humiliation stemming from past defeat (the First Sino-Japanese War) that has yet to be rectified, as well as a lingering outcome of the unfinished civil war. These frames have been institutionalized through museums across the country and reproduced in state-sanctioned textbooks (Mitter, 2020). Resolving the 'Taiwan problem' has thus become central to Xi Jinping's agenda of the 'Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation', contributing to the current escalation of war threats across the Taiwan Strait (see K.-J. J. Lin & Chen, 2026). In Taiwan, contradictory war frames – shaped by divergent historical experiences during WWII and the Chinese Civil War – have contributed to fragmented national identities, conflicting visions of the future and growing polarization within civil society (Yang, 2021). The outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war has further intensified anxiety in Taiwan, as the relationship between Russia and Ukraine is often framed in ways analogous to that between China and Taiwan. In Japan, the history textbook controversy since the 1990s reflects a clash between two competing frames: the *Greater East Asian War* and the *Pacific War* (Saito, 2017). On the international level, the so-called 'history problem' among China, Japan and South Korea may be seen as 'the continuation of past wars by other means', in which different actors compete to use conflicting frames to interpret and narrate historical memory (Jager & Mitter, 2007; M. Kim, 2016).

These examples illustrate just a few of the many areas in which the analytical concept of war frames can be fruitfully applied in future research. Importantly, such research need not be limited to scholars specializing in war, but can – and should – include contributions from a broad range of topics and areas, especially those in non-Western contexts.

Conclusion

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, I propose future directions for research in war studies. To further explore the war–society nexus, an eventful conception of war helps us grasp the transformative capacities of war, both in terms of material

resources and cultural schemas. Furthermore, the concept of war frames offers an analytical tool for examining how war and its legacies continue to shape contemporary worldviews. Moreover, the concept of war frames warrants further research. Frames shape how wars are categorized (e.g. self-defence vs aggression) and determine whose suffering is rendered visible or invisible. In this sense, war is not merely a military phenomenon but a socially framed reality that dictates whose lives matter. In addition, such a conceptualization of war also helps us analyse the legitimation of violence. War can be 'keyed' into different tones, such as humanitarian intervention or imperial conquest. Governments and media actors normalize certain forms of violence while condemning others, influencing the public tolerance for military actions. As such, the concept of war frames can be fruitfully applied to other research areas – for instance, media and propaganda. News coverage and political discourse construct frames that shape public perception, determining which victims are deemed grievable and thereby influencing the distribution of empathy (Al Nahed & Hammond, 2018; Knüpfer & Entman, 2018). War journalism, in particular, establishes hierarchies of suffering, legitimizing selective violence. In addition, war frames can also aid in the analysis of power and political interests surrounding war. Institutions construct war narratives to gain legitimacy, and states manipulate war frames to justify military intervention and surveillance policies. The way a war is framed also affects international support, determining which conflicts garner global attention and which are overlooked. These aspects highlight crucial questions that should be investigated in future research.

In sum, conceptualizing war as a historical event and introducing the concept of war frames enables us to study war as a transformative phenomenon that leaves durable imprints on societies and communities. Such a conceptualization makes our analysis more attentive to historical, cultural and geopolitical contexts, while also incorporating non-state actors and civil society. Through examining the cognitive dimension and meaning-making processes, it also helps us explore the significance of emerging forms of warfare, such as information warfare, cognitive warfare and hybrid war.

The concept of *war frames* can also advance our sociological understanding of war in several important ways. First, it illustrates how the three domains identified by Kestnbaum (2009) intersect: it helps explain how ordinary people are mobilized into war, how enemies are conceived of and treated, and what meanings particular wars carry. More importantly, the concept goes beyond Malešević's sociology of war and violence by demonstrating how war, as a structure-transforming event, can simultaneously *be framed* and *perform framing* in shaping the historical trajectory in durable ways. Conceptualizing wars as both events and frames allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how war transforms the world, and how it is experienced, narrated, contested and morally evaluated through different interpretive lenses.

As noted in the introduction of this article, not all classical sociologists ignored the problem of war. During its formative stage, themes of war and military society were central to the work of those 'bellicose' theorists such as Gumplowicz and Oppenheimer. However, this tradition became marginalized after WWII, as the US-centred model of modernization theory, coupled with structural functionalism, 'pacified' the discipline. If the third wave of sociological studies of war is to persist and bear fruit, it must *bring war back in*, to borrow the well-known phrase from the first wave of state-centred sociology

(Evans et al., 1985), and reintegrate war more fully into sociological analysis. This call should not be mistaken as an endorsement of militarism, but rather understood as a recognition of war's profound role in shaping human societies. War, as both an event and a frame, has been one of the most powerful – if not *the* most powerful – forces in the historical and contemporary transformation of social structures. As such, the third wave of sociological enquiry into war must not only be more inclusive of non-Western scholars; it should also involve sociologists who do not necessarily specialize in war or violence. After all, any comprehensive understanding of modern society remains incomplete without acknowledging the fundamental ways in which war has shaped – and continues to shape – the world we inhabit.

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Notes

1. Frames and habitus are two totally different concepts and should not be conflated with each other. The analogy here is simply to demonstrate how frames can be both 'framed' and 'framing', just as habitus is both 'structured' and 'structuring' at the same time.
2. In his theory of the civil sphere, Alexander analysed the binary structures of civil discourse, but where these binary codes come from remains under-theorized. According to our analysis here, many of these binary codes come from war frames, or the framing effects of war, that erect the boundaries of a (national) community. Alexander (2006) also touches upon this when he states that 'because civil society is territorial and spatially fixed, it produces its own enemies', and that 'the connection between national territory and the binary discourse of civil societies has been striking, and that it has inspired atrocious and putative wars' (pp. 197–198).
3. Since the name of war can hardly be neutral, the use of different names in this article is according to the context in which the war is mentioned.
4. This historical process involves measures and policies such as conscription, the granting of citizenship and suffrage, mobilization through nationalist propaganda and the commemoration of the war dead. See, for example, Tilly (1992), Giddens (1985), Mosse (1990) and Winter (1995).
5. This can be attributed to a few factors that emerged simultaneously at the same historical conjuncture: the development of technology in new weapons, the rise of military industry that

results in the 'industrialization of war' (Giddens, 1985), and the emergence of total war that calls for the mobilization of the entire society.

6. 'Banal nationalism', coined by Billig (1995), refers to those ideological habits that enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced unreflexively in daily life. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag being consciously waved with fervent passion, but the flag hanging unnoticed in public buildings.

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