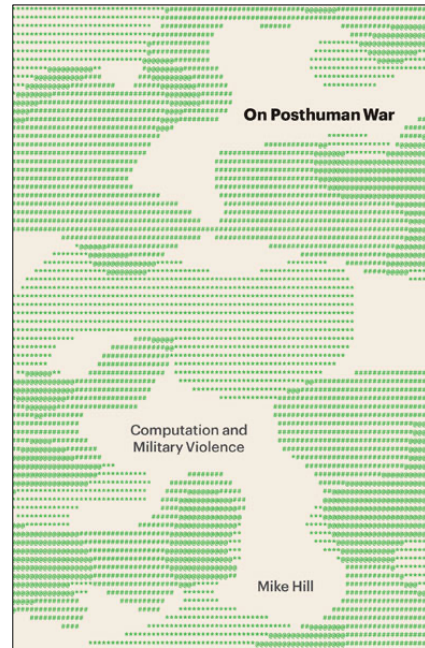


Mike Hill, **On Posthuman War: Computation and Military Violence**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 260 pp., \$28.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Maia Nichols  
University of California, San Diego

***On Posthuman War: Computation and Military Violence***, by Mike Hill, is divided into three chapters on war: “Demography,” “Anthropology,” and “Neuroscience.” Through a blend of political theory and philosophy linked to technological warfare examples, the author, a professor of English at the University at Albany, State University of New York, explains the secret conditions involved in wars’ political confirmation. War sets in motion the state. Communication in posthuman war takes on particular importance as armies run on computation. Within this, “decivilianization” occurs when one becomes a self-sacrificing and collectively thinking combatant. The loss of civil rights involved in military justice is discussed through philosophical theories, as well as the conditions that allow posthuman war to create amalgams whereby protected citizens are simultaneously annihilated. This paradox makes the differentiation of community ontologies and data gathering or media, or what became “data ontology,” lead to the collapsing of categories, where numbers prevailed in computational advancement.



Hill moves through several different epistemological approaches to consider how myriad forms of “intelligence explain the expansion of war-within-peace as it happens in posthuman war” (p. 11), from cybernetics to military violence, including posthumanist theory and systems thinking. The breadth of philosophers the author explores includes ecological thinkers from Quentin Meillassoux, Alain Badiou, Vladimir Lenin, William James, and Henri Bergson. Hill hones in on their rules on numbers as they apply to demography, anthropology, and neuroscience, while drawing on idealists such as Immanuel Kant and Jurgen Habermas, and posthumanists such as Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton. His book’s task is to articulate how these disciplines reemerge and gain meaning as “war disciplines” (p. 23).

The major contribution of this book is the discussion of how critical theory complicates our understanding of the computational bedrocks of war. Where do ecological thought and network-centric, systemic and scientific thinking converge? Politics and race are dependent on communication and media, which allow means and ends to connect. Whiteness is explored as subjective and communal. The coming post-White national consciousness is mobilized as a “White minority.” “White Afghans,” a term from the Human Terrain System program that deployed personnel to understand culture and viewed nonhuman agency as quantifiable terrain, showed how targets could flit between friend and foe (p. 123). Hill unpacks

the influence of white matter, the mass of myelin coating within the nervous system that mediates electronic flows, in cognition, showing how neural traits demarcate inclusion beyond race and gender.

The book asks how and whether science has spread into everything, everywhere, instead of remaining insulated in distant fields. Norbert Weiner dreamed of an institution of independent scientists, working as equals to understand regions. What happened to scientists who kept “their efforts to those fields that are most remote from war” (p. 30)? What Hill poses is whether this dream has turned nightmarish, whether the stakes are such that now all fields lead back to war.

Hill describes human beings as means, where means become everything, and everything becomes war (p. 35)—thus Hill posits no temporal or spatial limits to war. One might explore a critique of this by discerning what is exempt from the “military violence [that] crosses all boundaries and becomes unconditional” (p. 36). The recombination of the civilian and the suspect, or the capacity for the spy to be hidden within the civilian, forms the collapse from which this effusiveness proceeds. Hill also explores communities beyond political violence through Badiou, data security systems, and other ways of reconstituting populations.

Numbers encroach on subjectivity, through tools for siphoning diversity into numerical and military values. Subjectivity gets pushed out, “always coming in second place” (p. 46; Badiou, 2009, p. 84), as it “attempts to enclose, a moment in time where numbers have already overtaken it” (p. 46). Thus, posthuman war alters temporality and spatiality. The concept of the now being divorced from what is to come, Meillassoux’s (2007) notion that “the present is never pregnant with the future” (p. 232), invokes how chances are arbitrary and simultaneities can be massively distinct, “depending on what other events they may be determined to cause” (p. 47).

Throughout the book, Hill conveys how civil rights are lost as an arm of the law when the subject is laid bare to surveillance, violence, and death, in the name of national security. In Kant’s view, private property is essential within the public sphere, creating a tension between humanity and the earth: This expansion of humanity toward the possibility of communal possession is the same place that humanity has the potential for its coming extinction (p. 67). Again, this returns us to the threat of war as a kind of power, like a dream turned nightmarish, realizing both simultaneously where each dream achieves and manifests each nightmare.

The use of biology and psychology for understanding soldiers allowed racial factors to determine tactics and security policies, enabling research into character studies of the “enemy” for the purposes of war, such as against the Japanese. Computer science allows us to study human patterns as collapsed data, such as expressing translated data about foreign populations into numerical values that are key for military agendas. Soft power compresses time and alters spatiality to predict military strikes such as the Stochastic Opponent Modeling Agent (SOMA), a portal whose “technology is geared for what might be contentless war, as in where the identity of the enemy is open and all inclusive”(p. 105). For Hill, data literacy and the synergy between humans, and media “blurs the distinction between cultural and material relations” that decivilianize the population (p. 106).

All data can be deployed. What is in question is the loss of the split between representation and reality reliant on numerical values, not the anthropologist's oral account or the historian's written documents (p. 108). When multiple fields come together to extract data from matter, communication takes on currency both as a representation of reality, picked up by machines, and constitutes reality itself. Hill posits computation as inherent in nature, "nature computes" (Deutsch, 2012, p. 551). Computation can be understood as a physical process whereby physical objects, "harness properties of abstract objects" (p. 111; Deutsch 2012, p. 557) so that "identity becomes opposed to numbers, rather than otherness" (p. 112). Hill posits reality as a kind of computational exchange, and asks how nature can make things virtual, through Bergson, who arrives at this virtuality through the excess, parts left over in any relations whether amicable or opposed (p. 169).

Hill likens new military recruits to the bendable green figure Gumby. As 40% are ethnic minorities (Athey, 2019), they are already "open to myriad forms of human difference" (p. 116). Since subjectivity was not seen as mappable for the enemy, there being "too much" cultural information, the same devaluation of cultural data transpired within the troops (p. 118). It is not simply that culture in this context was "lost" but that it was not valued, because it was not translatable as numerical data. The complicity of military violence with race, and the use of cultural data are rich examples that could be further researched and taught.

Yet the relationships between humans, what they do, where they live, and the anchoring of culturing in geopolitics is precisely within the military strategy of mapping. It is spatial. Hill analyzes how physical space is occupied, and how landscape is computed, along with culture that is flattened as a mere element in a battlefield.

Hill analyzes the human body as a site of excavation, where biophysical reality becomes weaponizable substance (p. 138). He teaches the reader about a range of software and militarized computation strategies such as DARPA's microcomputers injected as pacemakers for organ controlling, explaining how nanoparticles work as intermediaries between humans and monitors. At risk is how technology allows for war to be "bred into brains" (p. 159). Hill also investigates the origins of war—are they in ownership, making war natural (Bergson, 1935, p. 254; p. 169)? Through Bergson, we learn about the semblance between technology and the mind, and their shared contingency on matter, and tool making—this is the paradox of existence in which humanity both complicates and simplifies its existence simultaneously (p. 172; Bergson 1935, p. 226). Flowing between philosophy, communication methods and the politics of diversity and race, the book bridges fields and informatively navigates the politics of war.

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