

War-gaming the Politics of Personality

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Theme: [History](#)

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War is merely the continuation of politics by other means(1) — Claus Von Clausewitz

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game. — R.D. Laing

“A continuation of politics by other means.”

One could just as easily say that politics is the continuation of war by other means. And perhaps surmise that the strategies of war games can also be pursued within a “predatory culture”(2) via interpersonal games.

The battle for dominance in the fields of war, sports and business often mirrors personal struggles for domestic one-upmanship. Family politics may follow patterns of office politics and vice versa. Fear and greed as demonstrated on Wall Street can poison human relationships in a more personal arena.

Games of all sorts often use the terminology of war, as the pursuit of war uses the terminology of games. People put on their “game face” in the bathroom mirror as they prepare to sally forth to engage with the citadel of commerce. They put on their game masks, their “personas”(3), to face the world. Now, alas, even that is insufficient, and must be further disguised with one more layer behind which to hide.

Just as there are tactics of war, there are tactics in business. How many aspiring CEOs pursuing an MBA have a copy of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* in their college backpack? And how many acknowledge warlike tactics in personal games with friends and family?(4)

Is it any less satisfying to feel one’s power over a lover, than to feel the thrill of martial music, while astride a prancing charger viewing one’s invincible army massed on the plain below? Is the art of seduction not often compared to a successful military campaign? The “battle of the sexes,” though now a tired cliché, could appear to a warring couple as a fight to the death with the enemy they are in bed with.

So the question left hanging out to dry, if not twisting gently in the breeze, is how these tactics relate to the shaping of personality. Do the power politics of the larger world insert themselves into our personas to shape our personal strategies, the strategies we use to engage with others in our everyday social relationships?

If the pursuit of power shapes the landscapes of war, sports and business, it can also shape our personal landscape and even the expression of our personality—of who we think we are. Conscious or unconscious shaping of our personality can be a means to pursue strategic

advantage in love or war.

If “all the world’s a stage, and the men and women merely players,”(5) can we not assume an appropriate persona to suit our desires? Do we not learn who we would like to be “when we grow up” as children playing house or doctor? Perhaps we may craftily weave a “tangled web,” when “first we practice to deceive,”(6) far better than we let on, even to ourselves.

It could be possible that some of us have taken, not Hamlet’s advice to the players: “Suit the word to the action, the action to the word,” but follow another path to “smile, and smile, and be a villain.”(7)

As Shakespeare’s Richard III prepares to play the part of the lover, confiding to the audience his plans to transform his discontent, so might we prepare to play parts on our own personal stages. And even disguise from ourselves our true intentions, much as a Method(8) actor gets lost in the part, virtually “becoming” the role.

Perhaps in a culture of dissembling, of dark and smokey mirrors, we may be better actors than we think.

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S. M. Smyth was a founding member of the 2006 World Peace Forum in Vancouver and organized a debate about TILMA at the Maple Ridge City Council chambers between Ellen Gould and a representative of the Fraser Institute.

Notes

(1) [The phrasing of the Clausewitz quote has been disputed.](#)

(2) [Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class](#)

(3) [Wikipedia, Persona](#)

(4) [Eric Berne, Games People Play](#)

(5) [Shakespeare, As You Like It](#)

(6) [Walter Scott, Marmion](#)

(7) [Shakespeare, Hamlet](#)

(8) [Stanislavski, An Actor Prepares, Method acting](#)

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