

War and Social Sciences

Richard Skellington, Society Matters 2, Winter 1999-2000

Was this the Peoples' Century or the Century of War? If we learn from history, why do we repeat its mistakes? Why is war, a significant characteristic of the history all of civilisations, but is relatively invisible in Faculty of Social Science curricula (any conflict with 1,000 battlefield deaths a year is generally defined as a war, New Internationalist, April 1999). Other institutions have embraced Peace and Conflict studies far more broadly than the Faculty.

Consider some of these 'social facts'. It has been estimated that in recorded history since 3600BC over 14,500 major wars have killed close to four billion people - two thirds of the World's current population (New Internationalist, April 1999). In armed conflicts since 1945, 90 per cent of casualties have been civilians compared to 50% in the Second World War and 10% in the First (Rupesinghe K., and Anderlini Sanam, *Civil Wars, Civil Peace*, Pluto Press, 1998). The planning and execution of war is still controlled by men, while women and children are the main victims.

The world on average spends over 3 per cent of GDP on defence - but some countries spend much more. Cambodia, for example, spends around 50 per cent of its national budget on defence. It is estimated that since the Cold War ended in 1989, around 85 countries have undergone some kind of disarmament, but 69 nations have been increasing their stock of weapons during the 1990s through purchases from richer nations (Cairns Edmund, *A Safer Future*, Oxfam, 1997). Amnesty International have estimated that torture occurs in over 100 countries, while over 40 nation-states employ torture as part of their control regime. Only a third of civil wars since 1800 have ended through negotiations. Since 1945, 25 per cent of conflicts have been resolved by negotiations. Since the early 1980s compromise settlements are becoming more prevalent, such as in Liberia, El Salvador and Guatemala (Rupesinghe K., and Anderlini Sanam, *Civil Wars, Civil Peace*, Pluto Press, 1998).

The USA is the World's biggest arms exporter supplying 40 per cent of the developing world arms in 1999. Britain is the second largest with a 25 per cent share of the legal global market, with Russia supplying 10 per cent. Britain is home to the four largest mercenary supplying companies in the World (Understanding Global Issues, No. 4, 1998).

War is business, profit, money, a failure of diplomacy by other means, propaganda, waste, rape, horror, torture, hypocrisy, misery, hell on earth, heroic, glorious. With the exception of the Polar Regions most land on earth has proved a source of conflict in history, has been fought over, conflicts fed by religious dogmas and tyrannical quests for power. Nations will fight to remove this polar oversight in the next millennium.

We enter the third millennium repeating mistakes since the dawn of humanity. There is nothing civil about civil war. Ethnic groups have always been cleansing other ethnic groups. The Bible is full of ethnic cleansing. And yet the Church of today fails to provide a moral commentary on the actions of our nation at war. What distinguishes the twentieth century is the impact of the media to provide the comment, with the greater use of propaganda in sophisticated form taking centre stage. Is there anything less tolerable than the spin of players on the war stage?

War means massive profits for media moguls. War sells newspapers. The century

began with the first genuine newspaper war (1914–1918), and ended with a Balkan conflict represented on the Internet. The wars of our century began and ended in the Balkans. Observing the Serb web site during the Kosovan Conflict demonstrates the great importance of history, echoed through art and other forms of representation – the site is choked with paintings of War, all the way back to the fourteenth century.

War brings genocide, smart bombs, lions led by donkeys, it brings out the worst and best in the human psyche. Who did remember the Armenians? There are hot wars, cold wars, star-wars, wars without names. There have been two Great Wars this century, struggles between liberal democracy, communism and fascism. We have endured the Cold War, which the recent impressive terrestrial television series concluded was a clash of ideologies in which the losers were Marxist-Leninists. Millions died during this cold spell: civilians and armed combatants lost in wars fought under the umbrella of super powers trying to affect a nuclear free war scenario. Many of the wars of the Cold War era might have happened anyway, but nuclear annihilation was temporarily avoided. In all wars, the real losers are the civilians, not the exponents or the ideologies.

War is solidly represented in all cultures and societies. War generates great literature, and art: Greek tragedies, the plays of Shakespeare, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the poetry of the Great War, the novels of Hemingway; great films from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, through *Le Grand Illusion*, *Paths of Glory*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and most recently *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan*, have exposed the cost of war, while Star Wars still pulls in the buck by the billion, and *Wag the Dog* curiously got a lot right before the event. Great music too: war requiems by the score. Perhaps the finest painting of the twentieth century concerns the inhumanity of war, and is reproduced below (Picasso's *Guernica*).



War generates its own language and reuses language in disturbing ways. It is tragically ironic that NATO during the latest Kosovan War called in Apache Helicopters, a killing machine named after a nation which itself was ethnically cleansed by one of principal Balkan participants, the USA, an irony lost on most people. During the 1990s the language of war includes degrading, body bags, smart bombs, a tolerance of faulty intelligence, collateral damage, decommissioning, and syndromes. Indeed, it has become fashionable not to have wars, or declare wars. Hence, we suffer the Bosnian conflict, the Kosovo conflict. Truth is the first casualty of 'war'.

When not at war foreign policy is closely linked to the sales of arms: market forces take priority over humanitarian commitments. The warmongers just might have the edge over the United Nations. War is good for western wealth creation. And this goes

for afterwar scenarios, as monopoly capitalism fights to reconstruct the land its exports have ruined. In May 1999 the bidders were already slicing up the Balkan reconstruction gold mine.

War produces psychoses and shatters lives and families. It brings shell shock and Gulf War syndrome. It produces factors, as in Falklands, and perhaps the Balkans. It always generates refugees, uproots civilians seeking safe havens. War pollutes and causes widespread environmental damage. The Gulf War and the Balkan conflict of the 1990s generated substantial ecological damage, especially in the form of chemical pollution (dioxins) and radiation.

War does all these things, but in social science war remains remote and unproblematised. It's flames flicker backstage as academics debate on the mainstage of fame, reputation, competing egos and 'isms, while descendants of the Founding fathers, grind out another spurt of obfuscation. Meanwhile the global economy remains relatively dumbed down by powers of explanation. That is one cynic's view.

It is only recently that Social Science has begun to represent the significance of war for society in its curriculum. Yes, there have been key contributions historically in the social sciences, most notably by Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents*. The Open University ran *War and Society*, a key course, for many years. It was a course which owed much to the efforts of Professor Arthur Marwick, the Open University's Professor of History. It was followed by *War, Peace and Social Change: Europe c.1900-c.1955*. These courses were among the most popular third level courses in Open University history, and were characterised by high student retention rates. The student interest is there. Why is it that history and the arts attempt to understand war and conflict while much of Social Science still beats about the bush?

More understanding of war and conflict is apparent in the globalization sections of the Faculty of Social Science new foundation course, *DD100 An Introduction to the Social Sciences: Understanding Social Change*. There have also been developments in the past two years towards the eventual possibility of a full credit undergraduate course in human rights and responsibilities which would feature children's rights, especially in conflict arenas: such a course would also look at international law, justice, rights, and responsibilities. War analysis and understanding in social sciences should increase.

FACT: America lost more soldiers killed in The Civil War of the nineteenth century than in the Great World Wars of this century and Vietnam put together.

FACT: The Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 between Germany and Russia cost a total of over 50 million lives.

FACT: In Vietnam, 55,000 American soldiers were killed in combat; after the war 100,000 Vietnam veterans committed suicide.