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Review - The Good War: NATO and the Liberal Conscience in Afghanistan

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One of the challenges facing anyone who wishes to write on the war in Afghanistan is to squeeze this fiendishly difficult topic into an appropriate framework. It is not easy to find an approach that avoids either simplifying the issues, or bamboozling the reader into boredom, confusion, deep cynicism, or a combination of all three. That Michael J Williams manages to meet this challenge at all in *The Good War: NATO and the Liberal Conscience in Afghanistan* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), let alone in 147 pages, is itself a noteworthy accomplishment. *The Good War* is an effort to explore the reasons for NATO's struggles in Afghanistan, proposing that the problems this organisation has faced are 'more about NATO than they are about Afghanistan'. For Williams, this rests two key observations which form the first half of the book.

The first observation relates to the NATO as an institution itself. Having been designed to address Cold War threats, in the context of a bipolar system, NATO, argues Williams, is now facing Ulrick Beck's 'risk society' in the search for its *raison d'etre* in the post-Cold War World. The organisation has become a 'risk manager', and as a result is being asked to operate in a climate with which it is not familiar. In the case of Afghanistan, NATO has been forced to territorialize risk, a tendency that manifests itself in the security narratives of policy elites on both sides of the Atlantic with their conflation of terrorism, terrorists and Afghanistan. As he rightly points out: 'in the minds of Western security analysts, the word 'Afghanistan' is synonymous with security risk' (27).

The second observation draws on the specific worldviews of NATO's two primary blocs: the US and Europe (it is not entirely clear where Canada lies). For Williams, Europe and America interpreted 9/11 and the problem of Afghanistan 'within their own ideational contexts' which reflect their differing historical experiences, embedded security discourses found in policy elites, and the views of their domestic populations. Williams uses Isaiah Berlin's essay on the Hedgehog and The Fox to illustrate the point. As he argues, whilst the US has traditionally sought to identify a single narrative answer in responding to the security challenges it faces, Europe has ceased to believe that such an answer exists. In the aftermath of 9/11 the US therefore invoked the concept of 'good versus evil' and 'liberty versus tyranny'. The War on Terror became a process of confronting evildoers, and the hatred of freedom, wherever it may prosper. This required a muscular foreign policy programme wrapped in the universalising rhetoric of liberty, justice, and human dignity. Achieving these aims was tied in with the promotion of democracy, thus leaving us at the core dilemma of the liberal conscience: that although liberalism is traditionally opposed to war, in pursuit of avoiding future conflict, liberals admit that it is necessary to spread liberal values, and that this in turn may require war.

Europe, on the other hand, resembles the fox in Berlin's metaphor, drawing on a variety of experiences and deciding that the world cannot be boiled down into a single idea. So although Europe and America share the liberal commitment to freedom and democracy – and face the same dilemma posed by the liberal conscience – they differ over the extent to which this can be a universalising quest: 'Europe seemingly accepts that the promotion of democracy cannot be writ large upon what is ultimately not a blank canvas. Democracy at the point of a gun will most certainly not work' (52). The US hedgehog therefore remains more philosophically committed to the enlightenment principle of the relentless march of progress, or to put it into more contemporary terms: the Fukuyaman notion of the 'end of history'. Meanwhile the European fox has taken a postmodern turn, expressing a general scepticism of history's progress, and casting a critical eye on foreign policy metanarratives. On a more practical level, in European capitals, NATO's role in Afghanistan had a more political explanation too. As Williams highlights, all too often the fact is overlooked 'that NATO's involvement in Afghanistan was motivated by the political crisis in transatlantic relations following 9/11' (60). Those European capitals which saw the Iraq invasion as a step too far could placate their US allies by contributing to the 'good war' in Afghanistan.

Therefore, in Afghanistan NATO is hamstrung not only by its institutional nature as an organisation designed to deal with maintaining the balance of power (not managing risk), but also by the specific world views of its two dominant blocs: the US and the EU. The 'climate for operations' which was allowed to develop in Afghanistan should be interpreted, argues Williams, as a reflection of these problems inherent to NATO and its member states, not as a reflection of the problems inherent to Afghanistan.

Having dealt with the more philosophical elements of his argument, Williams moves on to a discussion of the

practical aspects of NATO's approach to the Afghanistan campaign. Included here is the concept of the 'comprehensive approach' in state-building, which sought a complementary alignment of economic, military and diplomatic power, within and between national governments. Williams argues that in truth this has amounted to the militarisation of development within the NATO context, with the military dominating the spheres of governance and development.

The institutional embodiment of the comprehensive approach, the so-called 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams' are also discussed, with the argument that their blurring of the humanitarian and military spheres has further contributed to ambiguity in strategic approach whilst potentially undermining the impartiality of humanitarian actors. Williams uses the United Kingdom as a case study in drawing out the challenges of civil-military coordination at the national level. These practical challenges conclude at a global level with the problems of achieving security in a networked world.

The point Williams makes is that NATO doesn't necessarily face *new* problems in Afghanistan, but rather that the campaign has exposed frailties in NATO's existing structure which demonstrate more fundamental conceptual deficiencies in the way that security is to be conceptualised in late modernity. These deficiencies are embedded in NATO as an organisation designed to deal with a conceptualisation of security from which the world has now moved on.

The method by which Williams goes about making his argument can certainly be described as eclectic. Citations sweep from Baudelaire to Bill Bryson. But the approach also arguably reflects a method that Peter J. Katzenstein would refer to as 'analytically eclectic'. As Katzenstein describes it, such scholarship is marked by three features: firstly, 'downplaying unresolvable metaphysical divides and presumptions of incommensurability and encouraging a conception of inquiry marked by practical engagement, inclusive dialogue, and a spirit of fallibilism; secondly, taking on 'problems that more closely approximate the messiness and complexity of concrete dilemmas facing "real world" actors'; and finally offering 'complex causal stories that extricate, translate, and selectively recombine analytic components—most notably, causal mechanisms— from explanatory theories, models, and narratives embedded in competing research traditions' (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 411).

Williams has produced a work which ticks all three of these boxes, in the process helpfully outlining and providing a framework for understanding NATO's problems in Afghanistan. If you are hoping for a deeper understanding of Afghanistan specifically this is not the work for you. The nature of the Afghan state and its history is given short shrift, but this is not the point of the book. In dealing with NATO specifically Williams takes a necessarily open-minded view of the analytical problem. The concepts he does draw on are briefly elaborated, allowing their rapid application to the task at hand. This means that deep theoretical reflection is also put to one side. *The Good War* also serves to highlights contestations within the Liberal peace, and suggests that these contestations may be institutionalised within the core security structures of the West.

On more practical points, in this short text Williams manages to pick over some of the salient points in NATO's post 9/11 operational conundrum: How to reconcile competing conceptions of security in the transatlantic alliance; how best to capture the challenge of failed and weak states especially in the midst of conflict; the trend towards the militarisation of development; the challenges of civil-military relations and the comprehensive approach. Dealing with these points he deploys a battery of concepts raising questions that might be further explored. The eclectic approach showcases the potential for different research traditions to operate side by side. If nothing more, this lends to the work a refreshingly unique perspective on a war that has become the defining conflict of this young century.

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Referenced Works:

Sil, Rudra and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms Across Research Traditions', *Perspectives on Politics*, 8/2 (2010), 411-31.