The Transformation of War

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/16/the-transformation-of-war/

SARAH MILLER, AUG 16 2012

'The worst of war is behind us' (John Keegan). Do you agree? (2008)

There has been a shift in attitudes toward war, which has taken place most visibly in the most developed and powerful states in the world, and has resulted in a transformation in how war is practiced. This essay will argue that although war is not disappearing, the way it has transformed means that the worst of war is indeed behind us. It will be argued that theories that base the changing character or obsolescence of war on rational factors fail to convince, because war is not contingent on rational factors alone. Instead, the practice of war is also a function of how people *feel* about war; therefore a change in these feelings must occur in order to change how war is practiced. This has arguably happened in much of the developed world, but the result of this is not war's disappearance, but rather its transformation, into a less frequent and more humane practice. This argument does not deny that war continues to be extremely destructive and inhumane in many parts of the developing world, and that for the people in these societies it sounds cruel and disconnected to say that the worst of war is behind us. Yet if this type of war is no longer sought after by the strong in the international system, but instead exists primarily in weak states and in criminalized form, then it makes sense to say that the global trend is away from it.

Many scholars who argue that the worst of war is behind us, that war is becoming obsolete, or that major inter-state war is disappearing, base their arguments on war's failure to be a rational policy instrument in modern times (Kaysen, 1990; Keegan, 1998; Mandelbaum, 1998; Mueller, 1989). They emphasize the higher economic cost of going to war and the diminished gains from winning one (Kaysen, 1990; Mandelbaum, 1998), because of trade and economic interdependence, the state's new role as a market state, and the declining importance of territory for a state's economy (Kaysen, 1990). They also credit the existence of other, less costly ways to solve political problems, primarily through international institutions, and stress the role that international organizations have played in mitigating the insecurities of an anarchical international system (Mandelbaum, 1998). Some emphasize the role of particularly destructive modern technologies, especially nuclear weapons, saying that these change the calculation of risk, and damage war's ability to serve as a policy instrument (Kaysen, 1990; Waltz, 1981). According to Kaysen, no state will initiate a war unless it expects to gain politically or economically, and the changes in both these areas in the past 150 years have altered this calculation, so that war no longer recommends itself as a useful instrument (1990).

While these arguments make sense for why war should cease to exist as a policy instrument of states, they fail to make a convincing case for a number of reasons. First, they are mostly not new arguments: 5 years prior to WWI Norman Angell made the case for why war does not make economic sense, and various technologies were said to spell the end of war when they were invented, such as dynamite, the submarine, artillery, the machine gun, and poison gas (Ray, 1989). Furthermore, it can be argued that economic interdependence and institutional cooperation are a consequence, rather than a cause, of mutual trust and a desire for peace (Mueller, 2004). Most importantly, conditions that make war irrational as a policy instrument are not enough to deter war. War is not only a policy instrument, or 'politics by other means' (Clausewitz, 1976); it is also an emotional and not fully rational practice.

An analysis of the place of war in human society must go beyond looking at it in rational terms as an instrument to achieve political or economic ends, which overlooks the fact that war is not, fundamentally, a rational activity. It would not have survived this long if it had only instrumental value, because it relies on people being willing to sacrifice their own lives (Coker, 2008) – to be able to demand this of people it must appeal strongly to their emotions. Coker argues

that war exists not only on an instrumental level, to which the above arguments apply, but also on existential and metaphysical levels (2008) – war is imbued with the meaning of sacrifice. Van Creveld sees war as an activity that offers men complete freedom, and an ultimate test of their worth (1991), while Freud sees it as the expression of a dark part of the human psyche, which wants to kill and destroy (in Ehrenreich, 1997), and Ehrenreich likens the feelings invoked by war to those of religion, saying it fulfils deep psychological needs (Ehrenreich, 1997). If we accept that there is something about war that appeals to human emotions, does this mean that we are doomed forever to fight wars, and that the worst of war cannot be behind us in number or in kind?

Although war may create a strong sense of emotional and spiritual satisfaction, it also creates repulsion in those who fight and in wider society. The euphoria at the beginning of WWI turned into repulsion with the war and war in general; the nationalism and intolerance of dissent in the US in the early days of the 2003 Iraq War gave way to widespread disgust with the war and questioning of American motives. The myth of war sooner or later gives way to the sensory reality of war, and when it does, the public no longer celebrates but rather condemns the violence (Hedges, 2002). Furthermore, in the past century there does seem to have been a transformation in how people think of war. War in general is no longer glorified as an honourable practice, but is instead criminalized, with those who initiate it seen as rogue actors (Mandelbaum, 1998). Ray attributes this change to modern ideas about the value of the individual human life, which are expressed not only in changing attitudes toward war, but also in changes toward capital punishment and human sacrifice (Ray, 1989), and perhaps the rise of the global human rights regime. A parallel could be made with slavery: a shift in attitudes about the morality of slavery was instrumental in its demise as an accepted practice (Ray, 1989), and while slavery still exists today, it is a criminal enterprise that is rejected by public opinion and by law. There is an important difference between institutionalized legal slavery and criminalized slavery, and similarly there is a difference between these two types of war.

The outcome of this modern moral shift toward war, given the fact that war continues to exert an emotional pull on people and societies, is arguably neither the disappearance of war, nor the continuation of business as usual, but rather the transformation of war. War, a 'protean activity' (Keegan, 1998), has transformed in order to remain acceptable to modern attitudes. In response to the almost universal repulsion with long and bloody wars, the destructiveness of war has been limited through technologies and tactics (Coker, 2008). So, for example, there has been increasing development and use of precision weaponry to minimize civilian casualties, as well as unmanned technology such as drones to lessen, and one day perhaps eliminate, military casualties on our own side. Warfare has become increasingly constrained by laws prohibiting the use of certain weapons. Similarly, war is justified through rhetoric of self-defence or humanitarianism, not in terms of the national interest or honour and glory for the nation. The requirement, by domestic opinion and international law, that wars be "just" in their means and in the reasons for waging them, is a serious constraint on the ability and willingness of states to go to war for classical national interests.

The objection may be raised that, while conventional inter-state war between states may be cleaner and less frequent than ever before, unconventional war and war in much of the developing world is dirtier and more prevalent. Therefore the worst of war may be behind us in the Western or developed world, but for people in the non-Western, developing world, war is perhaps worse than ever. The brutality of the wars in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, and Uganda, for example, seem to support this claim. These types of conflicts thrive in states with weak, kleptocratic, or illegitimate governments (Coker, 2004; Keegan, 1998), where criminal elements in society perpetrate and prolong the fighting (Mueller, 2004; Hedges, 2002) because they stand to gain economically and politically (Ray, 1989). This suggests that improved governance and economic development has the ability to reduce these conflicts. The fact that, as Mandelbaum says, the practice of war is now the tactic of the weak of the international system instead of the prerogative of the strong (1998), suggests that the path of progress and development is not in war's favour.

One can define the worst of war by number, as in how many states, or how many people, are involved in fighting. It can also be defined by kind, thus one can see the worst of war as the Battle of Verdun in WWI, where each square metre of the battlefield received 1,000 shells (Coker, 2008), or as the bombings of London, Dresden, Tokyo, or Hiroshima in WWII, or as sending children into battle. In number and in kind, it seems that the trends of the past 100 years mean that the worst of war is, most likely, behind us. A change in how war is perceived in the developed world has forced war to become cleaner and less frequent, in order to remain acceptable in the eyes of publics. The dirty

wars that are still prevalent in much of the developing world are vulnerable to political and economic progress, and it does not seem too naïve to say that overall, the global trend is toward wars that are less destructive and less frequent. Thus, although war is not on a trajectory toward disappearance, it can be argued that the worst of war is behind us.

References

Clausewitz, Carl Von. (1976) *On War* (M. Howard & P. Paret, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1832).

Coker, Christopher. (2004) *The Future of War: The Re-Enchantment of War in the Twenty-First Century.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Manifestos.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. (1997) *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* . New York: Metropolitan Books.

Hedges, Chris. (2002) *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning.* New York: PublicAffairs.

Kaysen, Carl (1990) Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay. *International Security.* 14(4) pp.42-64.

Keegan, John. (1998) *War and Our World.* London: Hutchinson.

Mandelbaum, Michael (1998-9) Is Major War Obsolete? *Survival.* 40(4) pp.20-38

Mueller, John. (1989) *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War.* New York: Basic Books.

Mueller, John. (2004) *The Remnants of War.* Ithica: Cornell University Press.

Ray, James (1989) The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War. *International Organization.* 43(3) pp.405-439.

Van Creveld, Martin. (1991) *The Transformation of War.* New York: The Free Press.

Waltz, Kenneth (1981) The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better. *Adelphi Papers.* London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 171 pp.1-32.

—

Written by: Sarah Miller
Written at: London School of Economics and Political Science
Written for: Christopher Coker
Date written: 03/2012