

On War and Society

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REVIEW OF: Miguel A. Centeno and Elaine Enriquez, *War & Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017). 224 pp. £35.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-0-7456-4580-3.

The sociological study of war has experienced nothing less than a renaissance during the past fifteen years. Among the milestones in the reappearance of war in broader sociological thought was the somewhat disjointed English translation of Hans Joas' essay collection *War and Modernity*.¹ In the essays, originally published in the mid-1990s, Joas criticized the way social thought had largely disregarded war as a part of the otherwise seemingly idyllic and peaceful modern times. Similar criticism has continued since with Siniša Malešević's seminal *The Sociology of War and Violence*² and Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl's *War in Social Thought*.³ Combined with insights from historical sociologists like Michael Mann⁴ and Charles Tilly,⁵ who showed how state development and war were intimately linked in Europe, it became difficult to disregard the importance of war to our lives and societies.

The rediscovered focus on the sociological study of war emphasized that while classic sociology had engaged with war, the optimism towards progress and sociology that followed the Second World War meant that there was little appetite within the discipline for studying war. During the Cold War, the study of war was relegated to a niche in military sociology, which narrowly focused on the Western state bureaucracies that answered for managing external violence.⁶ As sociological phenomena, war and warfighting were largely ignored.

Wars nevertheless continued to be fought. Some of those who sought decolonization found violence necessary, even desirable.⁷ While

1 Hans Joas, *War and Modernity* (Malden: Polity, 2003).

2 Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3 Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl, *War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

4 Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, 4 vols, I: *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

5 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 990-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

6 Guy Siebold, 'Core Issues and Theory in Military Sociology', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 29 (2001), 140-59.

7 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1965]).



especially the end of the Cold War witnessed a newfound interest in internal conflicts, much of the resulting research underlined the necessity to understand *longue durée* sociological processes.⁸ Without such understandings, these seemingly new kinds of wars often appeared the logical consequence of what was taken as ancient hatred, if not mere criminality. Such simplistic – if not partisan – understandings could only lead to equally simplistic policy responses, unlikely to alleviate suffering or win wars. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 resulted in the re-emergence of the prospect of a large-scale interstate war in a way that only emphasizes the necessity to understand the phenomenon.

As the Princeton scholars Miguel Centeno and Elaine Enriquez convincingly argue in *War & Society*, while war has helped to form the world we live in, it is more often than not considered an anomaly. Reading their book made me realize that even my own graduate studies at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University had precious little to do with either war or society. It is in this context that *War & Society* makes its significant scholarly contribution: this short and well-written book seeks ‘to glean sociological insights about the nature of warfare and how it reflects and shapes social dynamics and institutions’.⁹ There is no doubt this work will be a major point of reference for the field of sociology of war for years to come.

War & Society is based on a course taught at Princeton University and uses a historical comparative method. The book concentrates on two partly connected claims. The authors argue that war has, over time, increased in size, complexity and organization. This claim explains the core structure of the book. Chapters 2–4 expand from the wars of the warrior to those of armies and societies. While the authors depart from individuals’ experience in war, they also see genocide as ‘pure wars of societies’.¹⁰ The second claim concerns the changed nature of war. This claim is elaborated in Chapter 1 and 5–6. Here, the authors investigate the nature of war, how wars build states and societies, and the relationship between war and society in contemporary times.

Centeno and Enriquez immediately make a case for war as a social fact, or ‘a reflection of and consequence of social structure, group norms, and relations’.¹¹ While this allows for a wide range of possibilities,

8 Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence*, pp. 311–31.

9 Miguel A. Centeno and Elaine Enriquez, *War & Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 1.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the authors nevertheless narrow down these prospects of what war is and focus on violence: 'the instruments of war are weapons designed to damage, mutilate, and destroy the bodies of enemies'.¹² Ultimately, the understanding of war in *War & Society* is that of Carl von Clausewitz, who famously defined war as the use of force to make the enemy submit to our (political) will.¹³ Clausewitz' observation serves to differentiate and legitimate the instrumental use of organized violence between institutionally distinguished groups from other forms of socially marginal violence. As the authors note, war is an inherently contradictory and Janus-faced phenomenon, where brutality is balanced with cooperation. Similar interesting paradoxes regarding war are discussed throughout the book. Yet as the authors highlight, it is this recognition of war as a social phenomenon – which Clausewitz equally recognized – that makes sociology invaluable in the study of war.

While viewing war as a social phenomenon opens up many different ways to investigate it, the path taken in *War & Society* is not a broad one. Even though it could perhaps have been deduced from the name of the course the book originates in – *The Western Way of War* – it only later becomes apparent that the volume emphasizes the 'standard form of warfare'¹⁴ and the 'Westphalian model of war'.¹⁵ *War & Society* hence concentrates on 'organizational and technological developments'¹⁶ in modern Western wars. The focus thus remains on a particular kind of war, fought by particular kinds of people at specific times in history. This narrow focus limits our understanding of war as a phenomenon, considering that most current wars are not fought in our societies, by Western combatants, or even necessarily by states. This limitation also feels somewhat unnecessary, considering Centeno's previous focus on Latin America,¹⁷ as well as the slowly accumulating anthropological and sociological literature on war in other societies.¹⁸ If war indeed is

12 Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 5.

13 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1989).

14 Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 148.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

17 Miguel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002).

18 Tarak Barkawi, 'Decolonising War', *European Journal of International Security*, 1.2 (2016), 199–214; R. Brian Ferguson, 'Ten Points on War', *Social Analysis*, 52.2 (2008), 32–49.

a social fact, does it not logically follow that it can be constructed in varying ways in different contexts?¹⁹

The focus on Western societies limits applying sociological theories in the analysis of war in the chapters that concern the warrior, armies and societies. One could have expected these chapters to focus on a specific level of analysis with its particular sociological processes. For instance, the war of warriors: individual and micro-level group dynamics, the war of armies: meso-level organizations that seek to instil military values, duty and discipline, and the war of societies: macro-level factors. While the authors acknowledge that the different levels interact with each other, separating the levels is crucial for comparative studies. The main reason why military sociology has exclusively focused on military institutions is the assumed presence of many macro-level factors which are far from universal. These assumptions, that largely derive from Western militaries, has limited the application of these theories to other cases, not least those that are non-modern, non-Western and non-state.²⁰

Instead of focusing on the creation of force through meso-level sociological processes, the chapter on armies (Chapter 3) concentrates on the management of force. Ultimately, the chapter resembles William McNeill's *The Pursuit of Power*²¹ and concentrates on the historical relationship between technology, armed force and society. Ultimately, the chapter discusses the factors that enabled increasingly effective killing, crucial not least in relation to European attempts at global domination.

The chapter on war of societies (Chapter 4) investigates the conquest and extermination of societies. Here, the long discussion of the Holocaust appears out of place. The surprising claim that its perpetrators were irrational²² is later conflated with the nuclear 'wizards of Armageddon'.²³ Considering that national socialism sought a racist utopia that required the extermination of those who did not fit in, disconnecting politics and genocide in this and other cases remains controversial. While these chapters support the first claim, the latter is not exactly a novel

19 Ilmari Käihkö, 'Constructing War in West Africa (And Beyond)', *Comparative Strategy*, 37.5 (2018), 485–501.

20 Ilmari Käihkö, 'Broadening the Perspective on Military Cohesion', *Armed Forces & Society*, 44.4 (2018), 571–586.

21 William Hardy McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

22 Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 109.

23 Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

one.²⁴ Future research on the sociology of war would do well to dedicate more attention to the more fine-grained sociological processes that have to do with war.

At times, the authors could have linked their use of terminology to other debates in order to prevent confusion. For instance, early on they argue that ‘the nature of war has changed’ in modern times.²⁵ In war studies, it is often assumed that the *nature* of war remains constant, while its *character* changes, for instance through technological and societal development.²⁶ While others have subtly criticized these views,²⁷ *War & Society* refrains from doing so – despite the important recognition that ‘different societies practice different forms of war, and different styles of conflict produce different societies.’²⁸ Returning to contemporary Western realities, the authors believe that changes in contemporary warfare are leading to ‘the return of the warrior.’²⁹ With the growing professionalization of armed forces, war has become increasingly removed from many Western societies. At the same time, we have witnessed a ‘democratisation’ and fragmentation of war elsewhere.³⁰ This suggests a fundamentally different relationship between war and society, a crucial topic to which the authors will hopefully return in their future work.

The immediate counterargument to the return of the warrior is of course that professionalization hardly means that wars are fought by individuals. The term ‘military’ itself (used loosely in the book) suggests a specific relationship between war and society: organized violence has become the monopoly of a dedicated professional group, which derives its ends, means and legitimacy from their subordination to the state. While offering a catchy contrast to professionalization, it is misleading to describe the fact that this is rarely the case elsewhere as the ‘militarization’ of civilians.³¹ As the authors well note with many other de-

24 Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence*.

25 Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 3.

26 *The Changing Character of War*, ed. by Sibylle Scheipers and Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

27 Jan Willem Honig, ‘Uncomfortable Visions: The Rise and Decline of the Idea of Limited War’, in *The Art of Creating Power: Freedman on Strategy*, ed. by Benedict Wilkinson and James Gow (London: Hurst, 2017), pp. 29–48.

28 Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 29.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 162. See also Jan Willem Honig, ‘The Tyranny of Doctrine and Modern Strategy: Small (and Large) States in a Double Bind’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 39.2 (2016), 261–79.

31 Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 163.

velopments, even here the contemporary Western practice forms the exception rather than the norm. That said, the authors' worry about societal cohesion without mass armies is shared by many others. The discussions of reintroducing conscription in some European countries may be interpreted as a response not only to external threats, but also to internal ones.

Another issue with terminology arises from the authors' discussion of the positive social consequences of war, an aspect that is counterintuitive for many. While historical sociology has focused on the relationship between war and state, Centeno and Enriquez define states as 'the institutionalized rules by which a society governs itself' and 'the foundation for social and economic life. Without states there are no markets, no courts, no elections, and no public services'.³² This definition of state allows a wider interpretation that, for instance, makes possible the inclusion of various kinds of authorities in stateless societies. The references to Thomas Hobbes and Tilly nevertheless suggest that this is likely not what the authors mean. When it comes to wider applications, the later work of Malešević – which focuses on a broader category of social organizations³³ – compares favourably.

War & Society stands out in the existing literature on the sociology of war. Its conciseness and coherence make it an excellent textbook especially for undergraduate courses which investigate not only war, but also the origins of our societies. Simultaneously, the volume contains keen, at times provocative insights on virtually every page. While some of these arguments are debatable, many are not. Often these arguments are an encouragement to devote more attention to specific issues, for instance the influence of culture on war, hitherto not well understood. Everyone interested in war would do well to pay attention.

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³² Centeno and Enriquez, *War & Society*, p. 119.

³³ Siniša Malešević, *The Rise of Organised Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).