
The responsibility of intellectuals in times of war

War is a quintessentially social phenomenon that has provoked thinkers throughout history. Reflecting on the recent events in Ukraine and the history of realist thought on war, Paul Kelly, discusses intellectual responses to war and the inter-relationship of social thought with armed conflict.

It is hard to believe that I am writing this: Ukraine, a European country has been invaded by its neighbouring state Russia in an unprovoked assault. There have been many wars in my lifetime, most have been off-shored, fought either by proxies elsewhere in the world, or as imperialist interventions, such as Vietnam, or the various coalition adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, the reality of an interstate war in Europe brings home the fact of the prevalence of war and conflict.

Of course, having just published a book on [Conflict, War and Revolution](#), this should be no surprise, and it isn't, but it still feels strangely unsettling even from my office at LSE on a bright March afternoon. Today of all days I am reminded of my predecessor at LSE, the great L.T Hobhouse, writing the following after witnessing a Zeppelin raid on London from his garden in Hampstead:

“As I went back to my Hegel my first mood was one of self-satire. Was this a time for theorizing or destroying theories, when the world was tumbling about our ears? My second thought ran otherwise. To each man the tools and weapons that he can best use. In the bombing [...] I had just witnessed the visible and tangible outcome of a false and wicked doctrine, the foundations of which lay, as I believe in the book before me. To combat this doctrine effectively is to take such a part in the fight as the physical disabilities of middle age allow.”

[The Metaphysical Theory of the State](#), London 1918, p.6.

Of course, I have the luxury of not experiencing the Ukraine conflict at close hand, but from a safe distance and the comfort of the press and social media. The action in Ukraine and its uncertain consequences, as well as the longer-term misery for those involved, is all before us. But, the real sense of empathy with Hobhouse is the feeling of what is the point of what we do as political theorists, or scholars writing books on theories that explain or justify conflict, war and violence? Maybe the task is to assist in the necessary work of destroying these theories as Hobhouse hoped to do with his short book on Hegel's theory of the state. Yet Hegel is still taught and studied (as he should be), even if those crude ideological appropriations of his ideas have been largely consigned to the past.

What about the canon within my own work, which includes Clausewitz, Lenin, Mao and Carl Schmitt, as well as Thucydides, St Augustine, Machiavelli and Hobbes? All say important things about the recurrence of conflict and violence in war and politics. As such, they form a body of work that is often called realist theory, a staple of international relations, although less familiar in political theory with its optimistic arc of development towards some variant of the modern state as the vehicle for democracy and justice.



The later thinkers do not see violence and conflict, simply as a task for political institutions to manage and monopolize, they also see it as an ineradicable feature of human experience: something that can never be fully managed by wise rule and just institutions. Schmitt, for example is only too happy to provoke liberal democratic optimism for its hubris, as it is simply another face of violent power exercised for controversial ends in a persistent struggle between friends and enemies. Lenin and Mao have a similar view, although both thought that history did provide a source of redemption through the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist imperialism; yet even here Mao appears to suggest that revolution is an unending process that needs renewal. Clausewitz is different, a soldier as well as a political thinker (and yes he is that too); he is concerned with the activity of war and its inner logic as well as its place in state power and policy. The activity that Clausewitz discusses is one that has come home to Europe and has done so in a peculiarly traditional form that many commentators and scholars, thought had given away to 'New Wars' fought by non-state actors against multinational powers such as Peacekeepers or coalitions in mostly failed states. Instead, we have regular troops facing each other, with armoured columns and artillery and the shelling of cities.

Some theorists do indeed celebrate war, but the social and political thinkers in my book are not so simplistic, even if they are often rather cynical of contemporary assumptions that peace is the obvious norm and that it can be achieved by a combination of clear reasoning and the application of law. Hobhouse, with his need to demolish what he saw as a dangerous ideology glorifying conflict poses a question, should scholars, such as myself, dealing with war as a socio-political issue seek to demolish these thinkers? They are indeed by no means immune to challenge and critique. For myself, the important point is to see in them different ways in which conflict, violence and war are linked to the understanding of political agency.

For many, including those who are neither mad nor sociopaths, war and violence is an irreducible feature of human experience and cannot be wished away nor eradicated by a clever philosophical argument. There is no necessarily progressive logic in the exercise of arms whereby enlightened soldier/technologists replace combat with AI and cyber war.

In Kyiv at the moment, ordinary men and women will be trying to kill each other with weapons in streets and buildings in an echo of conflicts that took place in the same cities nearly a century ago. Conflict is not a failure of logic or the result of a lack of information and data. It is what we human beings do and will continue to do until the arc of the universe really does tend towards justice (a profession of faith rather than an argument!). Until then, it is essential to avoid the hubris of a comfortable rationalism and the task for political theorists in such circumstances as this week's assault on Ukraine, is to explore, analyse and discuss the ways in which conflict, war, revolution and violence are thought of as ever present in the historical order.

[Conflict, War and Revolution: The Problem of Politics in International Political Theory](#), is available Open Access via LSEPress.

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