

Book Review: The Iraq War: A Philosophical Analysis

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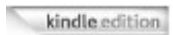
This book features a critique of key philosophical doctrines that dominate the Iraq war debate: just war theory, humanitarian intervention, democratic realism, and preventive war doctrine.

***Bassam Romaya** evaluates each doctrine and argues that the failure of philosophical discourse on the war derives from misunderstanding the ontological nature of new wars and ignoring the spread of global capitalism that fuels contemporary war violence. **Andreas Aagaard Nøhr** is disappointed by some weak discussions, but acknowledges that the book is strong as a survey of American thought on Just War Theory.*



The Iraq War: A Philosophical Analysis. Bassam Romaya. Palgrave MacMillan.

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Three general interrelated, yet irreducible, areas of inquiry can be identified when philosophizing war: *What* is war, *why* does war occur, and last, *how* do we justify war? The first question is the ontological question of war's being, its different levels and categories; a question that has been engaged with mostly within military academies and within Strategic Studies. The second question is *the* question that more or less defined the academic discipline of International Relations. Following the First World War, the question, "why do wars occur?", was asked in order to scrutinize how we can prevent them. Whilst, the third question has been somewhat restricted to Moral Philosophy, the development of nuclear weapons has made it an ever more important question to IR as well. We should note here that, because the questions are all about war, and therefore interrelated, they are easily confused with each other; and because of the basic irreducibility of these areas of inquiry we cannot, for instance, claim something about war's ontology based on a discussion of war's justification, nor their reasons for occurring.

In his book, *The Iraq War: A Philosophical Analysis*, assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell [Bassam Romaya](#) touches upon all three questions, yet he fails to present anything substantive or new. At its basis, the book is an examination and critique of the American philosophical discourse of the Iraq War. Just War Theory (JWT), Humanitarian Intervention, Democratization, and the notion of Preventive War are all taken as examples of discourses that have failed to justify the Iraq War along with other new wars of the new millennium. As such, the book is not just aimed at the Iraq War, but more generally at new wars – as opposed to conventional warfare – a notion that has gained much attention during the last few years.

The overall argument of the book is that 'the failure of philosophical discourse (with regards to the Iraq War) derives from misunderstanding the ontological nature of new wars ...' (p. 10). Or rather, that because the ontological nature of war has changed, the justifications that are and were given for going to war in Iraq and other places are no longer valid: New wars are "resolutely unjust" (p. 124). The premise for making such an argument in the first place is of course that war's ontology has changed. This, like all other claims of something changing in our world, can be quite problematic to show. What exactly has changed? Nevertheless, according to Romaya, the key to philosophizing war properly is to recognize the 'undeniable shift in the ontology of war' (p. 115) – the transformation from Clausewitzian wars to postmodern or new wars. But this undeniable shift is rather weak and in fact not undeniable at all. It is a much disputed debate; claiming un-deniability only makes the claim more suspicious.

The fundamental problem is that Romaya tries to make an argument about one area of inquiry – the justification of war – based on a premise from another area – war's ontology – without putting up a very good defence this is the case. As a result, the book is split between two sets of inquiry of philosophizing

war; while the former is argued the latter is not, it is merely presumed. Here lies the problem, because on one hand, Romaya has to effectually show that the ontology of war has changed, while on the other, he also has to push his argument regarding war's justification. This is only possible if both bodies of literature are consulted, but unfortunately Romaya fails to engage at all with Strategy and IR and instead the notion of new wars is more or less inherited from Mary Kaldor's book *New & Old Wars*.

Where Clausewitzian war was between states, regarding territory and grievances, and fought by means of standing armies that accounted for the majority of casualty rates, new wars, by contrast, are fought by a mix of state and non-state actors. Battles are rare if not non-existent, and civilians dominate the casualty rates. We ought to object, however, because at its basis, war is still about primordial violence, hatred, and enmity; the play of chance and probability; and war's element of subordination to rational policy. The deeper layers of war's ontology are left untouched and thus it seems that new war theorists need to get deeper into war's fabric and not just scratch the surface of minor categorical changes. Furthermore, the fixation on particular political or social entities seems an over exaggeration – as if states were the only political entities engaged in war activities in the past. This distinction is easily possible in theory, but not in practice.

Despite having delivered the most comprehensive work on the ontology of war, Clausewitz is given only one paragraph of attention (pp. 102-103). In this reviewer's opinion, it is impossible to avoid *On War* if the goal is to research the deepest levels of war's ontology. This, however, does not seem to be the aim of new war theorists such as Romaya. Instead, they rely on straw-man strategies to avoid any real engagement with Clausewitz's work. In fact, the term "Clausewitzian war" works as a blockade for engaging in any serious manner with Clausewitz's thoughts.

There are also some minor issues that appear puzzling. To further push his argument, Romaya discuss four positions from which the Iraq war has been defended within the American discourse. Accordingly, the structure of the book follows these positions – one chapter devoted to each – with the addition of a chapter about philosophizing war (chapter 6) in which, however, we learn that 'each argument is traceable to but not easily subsumed under theoretical foundations within the just-war tradition.' (p. 97) This makes me wonder: why not just focus on JWT and leave the others untreated? Furthermore, while the main villain of the book is JWT, it is a very narrow the reading of the tradition that is presented. European proponents are left out entirely, which is a shame as they have a very different take on the framework and its tradition.

The Iraq War and other new wars might be fundamentally unjust, but that might not necessarily imply that war's ontology has changed. The critical and pacifist tradition that Romaya is part of has always argued that war is unjust. So this new attack seems rather unnecessary. However, despite its problematic argument, the book does function as a survey of American thought on Just War Theory.

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