

How to speak of war

By Christopher Cramer,
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Martin Shaw is right that we do not need myths when it comes to war. There are two powerful myths about war and its relationship to change. One is the liberal myth. The other is the myth of redemptive violence, a source of the romanticisation of violence that infected many in the west through much of the 20th century and that appears in other guises around the world now.

However, name-calling ("Stalinist") and misreading people's arguments, as Shaw does in his **openDemocracy** article (The myth of progressive war", [12 October 2006](#) [1]), does not help advance the cause of breaking down myths and exploring uncomfortable, challenging possibilities. To claim that I "celebrate" wars is not only wrong, it is to create a taboo around thinking about wars, around thinking in any terms other than those of liberal internationalism.

I think Shaw agrees that war has often been an agent of change. He seems to think that my view claims it is "as likely to be progressive as destructive". Yet I do not argue this. Nor do I [argue](#) [2] that wars themselves come to be seen as progressive.

[Shaw](#) [3] is of course correct that the second world war was not "about" the liberation of the concentration camps. Similarly, the American civil war was not at first "about" the abolition of slavery - Abraham Lincoln only rather gradually came to be an abolitionist and to see this as an issue key to the war. And the Korean war was not "about" the developmental state that, in South Korea, eventually and extraordinarily emerged after the carnage.

Wars have not been "about" the changing role of women in the labour market or society in general; they have not been about technological or institutional change. And they have not been "about" the development of sustainable and (for all its evident failings) historically progressive capitalism. In other words, what may come to be seen as progressive are some of the changes provoked by the management of and reactions to violent conflicts.

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Also by Christopher Cramer in openDemocracy:

"The sense that war makes"
([5 October 2006](#) [6])

Christopher Cramer is replying here to Martin Shaw's critique of this article:

"The myth of progressive war"
([12 October 2006](#) [7])

None of this change is inevitable and, therefore, no one would "encourage" war or primitive accumulation. But we do have to ask why some changes emerging during or from wars are more positive and sustainable than others. And it is silly not to try to think about whether there are ways of developing and influencing those changes, once underway, that have a greater progressive potential.

If something "positive" might develop from some wars, then the violent origins are none the less unbearable for that. The problem is that violent conflict is often the effective reality with which people are faced: in that situation it is important to examine the scope for change that this violence might create. The parallel track is of course to work out how to produce the change without the violence. This is what would be socially mature: and it is what is involved in much research and debate on neo-liberal reforms, foreign aid, and political institutions and social movements in developing countries.

A shift of meaning

Martin Shaw takes another tack in his response: that the "dialectics" of war were once progressive but are no longer so, because of the threat of nuclear war and because of "new wars", which are genocidal and criminal. Yet the "new war" idea can also be a myth. The idea tends to go with a romanticisation of past wars as conflicts over something grand like ideology or honour. As Bernard-Henry Lévy puts it in his book *War, Evil and the End of History* [8]: "For a long time, wars used to have meaning...Those days are over".

There is nothing new about the idea that war is not what it used to be. Ernest Hemingway, for example, wrote in 1935, lamenting the wars of his own time: "They wrote in the old days that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. But in modern war there is nothing sweet nor fitting in your dying. You will die like a dog for no good reason".

The difficulty is that there is much in old wars (criminality, apolitical agendas, intimate violence, violence meted out to civilians), including the American civil war, the English civil wars [9], and others, that looks very like what is meant to define "new wars". Meanwhile in many contemporary wars there is much that is supposed to have been left behind in old wars, including the political.

As Stathis Kalyvas argues in his book *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* [10], the "burgeoning literature on so-called new civil wars is but the latest manifestation of urban bias" among intellectuals studying wars from a distance. There is a danger too that criminalising wars in developing countries opens the way for inappropriate western interventions.

Of course war is all hell and best avoided. But one can condemn the terrible damage and still be interested in the melancholy and complex history of the outcomes of war. It "will not do" to smother that interest by insisting on an exclusive focus on the destruction.

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