

The 'New Wars' Debate: A Historical Perspective Is Needed

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In recent years, a number of analysts have argued that qualitative changes have occurred in the nature of violent conflict and that it is now possible to think in terms of 'new wars' that are distinct in significant ways from earlier forms of conflict. This article summarizes the different arguments of the 'new wars' thesis and argues that the distinction between 'contemporary' forms of conflict and wars of earlier times is exaggerated and in some instances does not stand up to scrutiny, especially when drawing upon historical material. In particular, the article questions the extent to which contemporary forms of organized violence reflect new patterns in terms of actors, objectives, spatial context, human impact, and the political economy and social structure of conflict. Moreover, the article argues that the tendency in the new wars scholarship to identify common patterns in 'contemporary' civil conflicts ignores important differences among them. In conclusion, the article considers the importance of recent scholarship on conflict for the security discourse and state sovereignty.

Keywords 'changing patterns' of conflict • 'new wars' • security studies • violent conflict

VIOLENT CONFLICT IS A CENTRAL CONCERN of political science and international relations. Describing, understanding, predicting, and preventing violent conflict are core objectives of both empirical and normative scholarship. As a consequence, a major challenge and pre-occupation of scholars has been to identify sustained change in patterns of violent conflict and to establish generalizations about the causes, nature, and impact of conflict that have explanatory relevance beyond single cases. Over the last decade, a number of analysts have argued that qualitative changes have occurred in the nature of violent conflict and that it is now possible to think in terms of 'contemporary' or 'modern' conflict – and particularly civil war – as a departure from 'earlier' forms of conflict. This argument holds that 'one of the most dramatic ways in which the post-Cold War world differs

from the Cold War international system is in the pattern of violence that has been developing' (Snow, 1996: 1). Moreover, 'the new wars can be contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their goals, the methods of warfare and how they are financed' (Kaldor, 2001a: 6).

A number of the observations and arguments associated with the 'new wars' thesis are useful and interesting. However, some claims are problematic, especially when juxtaposed with historical sources of information concerning armed conflict. This article will summarize the different arguments of the 'new wars' thesis and argue that the distinction between 'contemporary' forms of conflict and wars of 'earlier' times is overdrawn and in some instances does not stand up to scrutiny. Moreover, the tendency in the new wars scholarship to identify common patterns among all contemporary civil conflicts ignores differences among them. Specifically, the article questions the extent to which contemporary forms of organized violence reflect qualitatively new patterns in terms of actors, objectives, spatial context, human impact, and the political economy and social structure of conflict in the 20th century. In conclusion, the article considers the importance of recent scholarship on conflict for the security discourse and state sovereignty.

New Wars

A number of variables can be used to approach the concept of the 'changing nature of conflict'. For example, first, the main protagonists and units of analysis of war, such as states or non-state actors, public or private actors, terrorist groups, and warlords. Second, the primary motives of protagonists, such as ideology, territorial secession, or material aggrandizement. Third, the spatial context: interstate, 'civil', regional, or global. Fourth, the technological means of violence – the weapons and strategies of war. Fifth, the social, material, and human impact of conflict, including patterns of human victimization and forced human displacement. Sixth, the political economy and social structure of conflict. In this article, the term 'new wars' is applied to a wide body of literature that argues or implies that clear changes have occurred in the patterns of violent conflict with reference to some or all of these variables. The term is not used to refer to any individual author, and the use of the term is not meant to suggest that all 'new wars' analyses hold exactly the same lines of argument. Nevertheless, it is possible to generalize the key points of the thesis:

- most wars today are intrastate rather than interstate, and interstate wars have declined in number while intrastate wars have increased in number;

- new wars are characterized by state failure and a social transformation driven by globalization and liberal economic forces; this gives rise to competition over natural resources and illegal commercial entrepreneurship, private armies, and criminal warlords, often organized according to some form of identity;
- ethnic and religious conflict are more characteristic of new wars than political ideology;
- civilian casualties and forced human displacement are dramatically increasing as a proportion of all casualties in conflict, especially since 1990;
- civilians are increasingly deliberately targeted as an object of new wars; atrocities and ethnic homogenization are key hallmarks of contemporary conflict; and
- a breakdown of public authority blurs the distinction between public and private combatants, and between combatants and civilians.

In terms of the main protagonists and units of analysis of 'new wars', the basic argument is that interstate wars have declined in number relative to civil wars – or even that we are seeing the 'end of old-fashioned war between states' (Kaldor, 2001b: 16). A common expression of this idea is presented in the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS, 2001: 4): 'The most marked security phenomenon since the end of the Cold War has been the proliferation of armed conflicts within states.' Violent civil conflict is generally linked with a social (or rather *unsocial*) environment that implicates a range of non-state as well as state actors. The weakening or undermining of the state is central to this environment, seen in the context of neoliberal economic forces and globalization that erode state capacity, authority, and public goods. In turn, a pattern of violence by private – often criminal – groups emerges in this vacuum of state authority and power, often associated with ethnic allegiances and often vying over natural resources or criminal opportunities. Thus, according to this argument, the spatial context of contemporary wars is generally within, rather than between, states, although usually with regional spillover processes at work. The global context is the decline of bipolar power and into this vacuum the (re)emergence of identity politics and criminality. And the actors are insurgency groups, criminal gangs, diaspora groups, ethnic parties, international aid organizations, and mercenaries, as well as regular armies. One of the most interesting, perhaps counter-intuitive, observations of this literature is the idea that international aid and intervention by the 'international community' exacerbates new wars: 'mafia-style economies and protracted internal warfare are often a result of international interventions which are actually claiming to foster the establishment of market structures and democracy' (Jung, 2003b: 12). This has the interesting implication

that 'provisions to provide a minimum of social security contradict their purposes in sustaining military *in*-security' (Jung, 2003b: 14).

Within the new wars and the mafia economy, the 'warlord' has pride of place, competing for control of parts of the illegal war economy, often based upon the control of an area of territory. Warlords are armed combatants who defend their interests through the use of violent force. Their objectives may be material, identity-based, or ideological – and are often a combination of all three. The idea of set-piece battles and conventional armies is far from this scene (Duffield, 2001: 14).

The social and economic context of new wars is characterized by weak or failed states, a collapse of the formal economy, and rivalry between criminal groups over natural resources or illegal commercial activities. Globalization is an important component of the political economy of new wars, and the starting point is that 'the age of globalization is characterized by a gradual erosion of state authority' and accompanying 'violent war economies' (Jung, 2003a: 2). As Kaldor (2001a: 70) puts it, 'the processes known as globalization are breaking up the socio-economic divisions that defined the patterns of politics which characterized the modern period. The new type of warfare has to be understood in terms of this global dislocation'. Thus, neoliberal economic forces have resulted in a weakening of state capacity and a weakening of the provision of public goods. So, 'the "failure" of the state is accompanied by a growing privatization of violence . . . the new wars are characterized by a multiplicity of types of fighting units both public and private, state and non-state, or some kind of mixture' (Kaldor, 2001a: 92). This phenomenon has been observed in a variety of contexts (Cilliers & Mason, 1999). In the most extreme cases, the state itself is criminalized as it becomes little more than a means to exploit state revenue and natural resources. Competition for control of the state is a competition for control over the power to exploit. The decline of state legitimacy and power gives rise to rivalry among non-state actors, and the distinction between public and private authority is blurred. Within this context, violence is effectively privatized, as the state's control and monopoly over violence declines as an extension of the erosion of state capacity: 'The new wars occur in situations in which state revenues decline because of the decline of the economy as well as the spread of criminality, corruption and inefficiency, violence is increasingly privatized both as a result of growing organized crime and the emergence of paramilitary groups, and political legitimacy is disappearing' (Kaldor, 2001a: 5). This is a 'globalized war economy': fighting units finance themselves through plunder and the black market or through external assistance. These sources are sustained through violence, so 'a war logic is built into the functioning of the economy' (Kaldor, 2001a: 9). According to Duffield (2001: 14), this logic is self-sustaining and rational, rather than an expression of breakdown or chaos.

Much of the new wars literature has argued that economic motives and greed are the primary underlying driving forces of violent conflict. Indeed, the violence itself creates opportunities for entrepreneurship and profit; the continuation of violence rather than military 'victory' is primary. In this context, Keen (1998: 11–12) has suggested that 'conflict can create war economies, often in the regions controlled by rebels or warlords and linked to international trading networks; members of armed gangs can benefit from looting; and regimes can use violence to deflect opposition, reward supporters or maintain their access to resources. Under these circumstances, ending civil wars becomes difficult. Winning may not be desirable: the point of war may be precisely the legitimacy which it confers on actions that in peacetime would be punishable as crimes.' Other analysts have put this into the context of globalization, which 'creates new opportunities for the elites of competing factions to pursue their economic agendas through trade, investment, and migration ties, both legal and illegal, to neighboring states and to more distant, industrialized economies' (Berdal & Malone, 2000: 3). Some authors specifically relate civil war in certain societies to the intensification of transnational commerce in recent decades, drawing a distinct picture of conflict in the late 20th century (Reno, 2000; Snow, 1996). Paul Collier (2000: 91) argues that 'economic agendas appear to be central to understanding why civil wars start. Conflicts are far more likely to be caused by economic opportunities than by grievance.' Not surprisingly, there is evidence that many civil wars are therefore caused and fuelled not by poverty but by a 'resource curse' (de Soysa, 2000; Ross, 1999).

In sum, globalization represents two processes in the new wars thesis. First, it underpins changes in the state – particularly an erosion of state authority and public goods – and social vulnerability. Second, globalization generates increased opportunities for economic motives in civil war as a result of trans-border trade, both legal and illegal.

The social and economic context is also closely linked to the primary motives of protagonists and combatants in conflict. The new wars literature focuses mainly on economic and identity-based motives. Snow (1996: 57) suggests that 'new internal wars' seem 'less principled in political terms, less focused on the attainment of some political ideal . . . these wars often appear to be little more than rampages by groups within states against one another with little or no ennobling purpose or outcome'. Indeed, the lack of clear political objectives and the absence of a discernible political ideology to justify actions is a common theme of new wars analysis. Kaldor (2001a: 6) suggests that 'the goals of the new wars are about identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars'.

The new wars thesis also makes certain claims regarding the social, material, and human impact of conflict, including patterns of human victimization and forced human displacement. This includes absolute numbers of

fatalities and displaced people, deliberate or inadvertent targeting of civilians, and the ratio of combatant to civilian casualties. The literature on new wars is unanimous in the view that 'an unhappy trend of contemporary conflict has been the increased vulnerability of civilians, often involving their deliberate targeting' (ICISS, 2001: 4). Thus, 'new wars' are characterized by the deliberate targeting and forcible displacement of civilians as a primary objective of violence, and the 'importance of extreme and conspicuous atrocity' (Kaldor, 2001a: 99). Systematic rape as a weapon of war, ethnic cleansing, the use of child soldiers, and a high proportion of civilian casualties are prominent features of these civil wars. This is often explained as a function of the changing context of violent conflict: that is, the objective of combatants is not necessarily victory over a rival political force or agenda, but rather the continuation of violence itself. As Snow (1996: ix) points out, 'in places like Bosnia, Somalia, Liberia, and Rwanda, the armed forces never seemed to fight one another; instead, what passed for "military action" was the more or less systematic murder and terrorizing of civilian populations'. Others concur (Allen, 1999; Shawcross, 2000).

The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997: xvii, 11) described the 'strategies and tactics that deliberately target women, children, the poor, and the weak', claiming that 'in some wars today, 90 percent of those killed in conflict are non-combatants, compared with less than 15 percent when the century began'. Kaldor (2001a: 100) states a similar idea: 'At the beginning of the twentieth century, 85–90 per cent of casualties in war were military. In World War II, approximately half of all war deaths were civilian. By the late 1990s, the proportions of a hundred years ago have been almost exactly reversed, so that nowadays approximately 80 per cent of all casualties in wars are civilian.' Chesterman (2001: 2) concurs with this basic trend.

In terms of forms of warfare, 'behaviour that was proscribed according to the classical rules of warfare and codified in the laws of war in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, such as atrocities against non-combatants, sieges, destruction of historic monuments, etc., now constitutes an essential component of the strategies of the new mode of warfare' (Kaldor, 2001a: 8). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees *State of the World's Refugees Report* follows a similar line of argument in terms of forced human displacement, which is closely related to victimization in times of war. It suggests that there have been 'changing dynamics of displacement' (chapter 1) and describes 'the changing nature of conflict' (UNHCR, 2000: 276–280). It observes the 'devastating civilian toll of recent wars', stating that 'in the post-Cold War period, civil wars and communal conflicts have involved wide-scale, deliberate targeting of civilian populations' (UNHCR, 2000: 277, italics added). The UNHCR states (2000: 282) that 'refugee movements are no longer side effects of conflict, but in many cases are central to

the objectives and tactics of war'. Again, among many academics, a common theme is that 'the global dynamics of flight and refuge are changing' in the context of the 'changing nature of conflict' (Schnabel, 2001: 109). The data presented by the UNHCR (2000: 306–310) appear at first to support this. As of 31 December 1999, the total number of people 'of concern' to the UNHCR – comprising refugees, asylum seekers, returned refugees, and internally displaced persons – was over 22 million. And the 'estimated number of refugees by region, 1950–99' shows an almost perfectly linear increase in refugees from 1951 to the end of the century. Kaldor (2001a: 5) concludes that 'the distinctions between external barbarity and domestic civility, between the combatant as the legitimate bearer of arms and the non-combatant, between the soldier or policeman and the criminal, are breaking down'.

The Reality of 'New Wars'

Cases of 'new wars' abound. The Bosnian civil war was a quintessential example. Here, the fighting was characterized by forced human displacement, severe human rights violations, ethnic cleansing, paramilitary groups, and national or ethnic identity politics. The environment was characterized by the collapse of the formal economy and public authority, and the exploitation of this by organized criminal groups. Conflicts in Burundi, Sierra Leone, Chechnya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Liberia, Congo, and Angola, among others, reflected some degree of these factors in the 1990s.

The literature of the 'new wars' provides a great service in explaining patterns of contemporary conflict, and especially in drawing attention to the social and economic aspects of conflict and the relationship between security and development. However, much of this is not new: all of the factors that characterize new wars have been present, to varying degrees, throughout the last 100 years. The actors, objectives, spatial context, human impact, political economy, and social structure of conflict have not changed to the extent argued in the new wars literature. The difference today is that academics, policy analysts, and politicians are focusing on these factors more than before, and they are understanding the underlying dynamics of conflict – and especially the social and economic factors – to a greater degree than in the past. In addition, advances in communication and the media have undoubtedly brought the realities of civil war – and especially the atrocities – to public attention more than before.

Shifts in the causes, nature, and impact of war are more apparent than real. Therefore, it is important to determine what is a genuine departure or change from the past, whether some of the characteristics of 'new wars' are more an issue of degree than of kind, or whether there is simply a state of

continuity, albeit with fluctuations in the incidence of certain factors due to the nature of specific conflicts. At least throughout the 20th century, it would be more accurate to conclude that the presence or absence of certain factors is best explained by the peculiarities of specific conflicts rather than linear historical changes. This is not to suggest that historical processes have not been reflected in patterns of violent conflict. In the post-World War II era, for example, a number of historical forces and processes have had an impact on the nature and impact of war. Decolonization and state-building, proxy Cold War conflicts, state collapse, globalization, the end of the Cold War, and the so-called 'resurgence' of identity politics have all arguably had an impact. However, it is problematic to assert a *general* departure/change from the past. The next section of this article will seek to challenge the assumptions of the new war thesis by responding to a number of specific claims.

Incidence of Wars

In terms of the incidence of types of wars throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, civil war has been more frequent than interstate war. However, it is not the case that there is a linear increase in civil war in parallel to a decline in interstate war for any sustained period, including after the Cold War. In fact, the Armed Conflict and Intervention Project (2003) at the University of Maryland suggests the opposite: the incidence of both interstate and civil war has shown a marked decline since the early 1990s, and the incidence of interstate war has shown a slight increase since 1997. The decline in civil wars after the Cold War – and particularly after 1992 – is also recorded in the war archive data trends of Hamburg University and others (Hamburg University, 2004; Heidelberg Institute on International Conflict Research, 1999; Peace Pledge Union, 2003). Smith (2000: 1) found that the annual number of armed conflicts rose sharply in the early 1990s and then stabilized and even declined. Uppsala University's Conflict Data Project concurs: 'the recent decline in armed conflict after the end of the Cold War has now brought the probability of a country being in conflict to a level corresponding to the end of the 1950s and lower than at any later time during the Cold War' (Gleditsch et al., 2002: 621).

Different analyses may present different results on conflict trends (largely as a result of differing definitions of conflict), but the notable quantitative analyses support this conclusion: that there has been no exponential or linear surge in civil war in the post-Cold War period, notwithstanding a spike in the early 1990s. Moreover, since 1992 the quantitative incidence of civil war has declined.

Human Impact and Victimization

The new wars thesis argues that patterns of victimization and human impact are peculiar to the late 20th century and are worsening. However, there is little evidence to substantiate such a claim. Warfare in the 20th century did not move from an ethos of chivalry among uniformed soldiers to one of barbarity among warlords and militias. Patterns of victimization are more correctly seen as a reflection of contextual and not temporal variables – that is, the circumstances obtaining in a particular situation. In terms of the human security impact of conflict, especially civil war, the deliberate targeting of civilians, rape, ethnic cleansing, and other atrocities are not peculiar to wars of the latter part of the 20th century. Nor are they peculiar to civil wars.

The new wars literature makes a comparison between contemporary post-Cold War conflict – with a high level of domestic conflict and state failure, resulting in civilian victimization and deliberate human displacement – and ‘earlier times’, such as the turn of the last century, when it is often asserted that warfare was primarily between states and fought by uniformed soldiers. Certainly, it is possible to identify conflicts – such as World War I – that may indicate a high combatant-to-civilian victim ratio when compared with a civil war at the end of the 20th century – such as those in Bosnia or Rwanda. But it would be misleading to deduce from this that the patterns of conflict and civilian victimization have changed in a linear fashion from the beginning to the end of the 20th century. World War I was hardly a typical conflict, and around the same time as the battles between the great armies in that war, huge cases of civilian victimization were taking place elsewhere – such as the Armenian ‘genocide’.

Atrocities have been a feature of all wars – both civil and interstate – throughout the 20th century and earlier, although certain types of violent conflict have reflected higher levels of deliberate civilian victimization, and it may be possible to make a generalization about this based upon the specific nature of conflict. But there is no temporal, qualitative, shift in the use of atrocity across the 20th century. Instead, there is non-linear fluctuation depending upon specific circumstances. And, in fact, at the turn of the century, we are witnessing a decline in absolute numbers of atrocities against civilians.

Forced human displacement – both collateral and deliberate – has also long been a feature of violent conflict, and ethnic cleansing is not peculiar to the wars of the 1990s. The UNHCR (2000: 282) states that ‘refugee movements are no longer side effects of conflict, but in many cases are central to the objectives and tactics of war’. But forced human displacement *has* indeed always been central to the objectives and tactics of certain types of war. The brutality of contemporary conflict – gender-specific violence, rape, mass murder, the use of child soldiers, and the spread of terror through con-

spicuous atrocities – is no worse qualitatively than it ever was, depending upon the specific nature of the conflict.

The UNHCR statistics suggest a fairly steady, exponential increase in refugees and international displaced persons, especially after 1990, which is in line with the common image of a resurgence of civil conflict in the immediate post-Cold War era. Yet, this may well be accounted for by two alternative explanations: a lack of reliable data, especially for earlier periods, and the increased *visibility* of human displacement and civilian victimization. Moreover, the manner in which these phenomena have become increasingly international issues – and thus ‘of concern’ to UNHCR – has often downplayed the fact that they have always occurred, to varying degrees.

If one considers the post-1945 era, and even with a lack of reliable data, one can intuitively reason that forced human displacement and civilian victimization have not reflected a clear direction or pattern as a proportion of all victims in conflict. Contrary to much contemporary thinking, one could even argue that conflict has become more limited in terms of its civilian death toll and impact upon human displacement since the end of the Cold War. The postcolonial conflicts in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria–Biafra, Rwanda, Burundi), Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos) and the Middle East resulted in huge numbers of civilian fatalities and human displacement, both within and across boundaries. Similarly, in Latin America (for example, Nicaragua, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, and Chile) conflicts or uprisings resulted in human displacement and civilian victimization that were markedly worse than during the post-Cold War era. In addition, although not traditionally considered as situations of ‘conflict’, Russia and China (the latter during both its civil war and the purges of the 1960s) experienced upheavals that resulted in the death or displacement of many millions of people. Afghanistan, again, saw displacement and civilian victimization during the Cold War on a scale that dwarfs what has been seen since.

There is, of course, the ‘new wars’ argument that the targeting of civilians in conflict is now more often *deliberate*, rather than a peripheral side-effect of war. In the context of contemporary civil war, this proposition is appealing. Sierra Leone, Somalia, Congo, Rwanda, and Bosnia – among countless other examples – have been wars of terror largely targeting civilian populations. Yet, again, this was exactly the case with many of the earlier civil wars mentioned above, and even in civil wars prior to those, such as the conflict of the Congo Free State (1886–1908) and the Mexican Revolution (1910–20).

Even in the case of interstate war, where the presumption of many analysts is that a significantly higher proportion of combatants than civilians are victims compared to civil war, the reality is different. World War II, for example, represented the most widespread incidence of all types of atrocity,

most pointedly in the form of the holocaust against the Jews of Europe. Moreover, in Germany's advance across the Soviet Union – beginning in June 1941 and culminating in the battle for Stalingrad – the number of displaced civilians and the scale of civilian impact was astronomical: 'Never did a population suffer so much from both sides in a war' (Beevor, 1998: 45). The systematic, almost institutionalized, use of rape and other forms of sexual brutality by members of the Russian army in its advance on Berlin reached proportions never seen since (Beevor, 2002: 28–32, 67, 326, 410, 414). During that time, in January and February 1945, almost 8.5 million people fled their homes in Eastern Germany in the 'largest panic migration in history' (Beevor, 2002: 37). The civilian toll of the 'interstate' conflicts between Japan and its Asian neighbors during World War II is also well known.

Social and Economic Context

The new wars thesis describes the social and economic context of war as one of weak or failed states, a collapse of the formal economy, and rivalry between criminal groups over natural resources or illegal commercial activities. Consequently, the primary motives of protagonists are economic self-aggrandizement and the consolidation of power, often based upon ethnic identity. Put into processes of globalization, this would seem to be a distinctly 'new' element of conflict. However, again, these elements are not qualitatively peculiar to wars of the late 20th century. Moreover, the idea of a 'new war economy' – where conflict enables an environment in which illegal economic activities can be pursued and where combatants do not necessarily seek military victory – may be overemphasized in contemporary conflict analysis. There may be a strong element of this in cases such as Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, this economic dynamic does not explain the motivations and tactics of all protagonists in these conflicts, and certainly not in all civil wars in the post-Cold War era. Thus, the war economy logic is not a general phenomenon or overriding explanatory variable in contemporary civil war. The war economy logic (in fact, the whole new wars thesis) does not fundamentally explain the conflicts in Sri Lanka, the Basque country, India, Nepal, Chechnya, and Indonesia, for example, where ideology and normative objectives have clearly been important in the post-Cold War era. Nor is the war economy peculiar to modern conflict. There is a range of motivations that might explain why actors engage in violent conflict, related to control of territory, economics, and ideological and identity-based issues. All such factors, in varying degrees, have featured in conflicts throughout the 20th century, although they have not all featured in every case, depending upon the particular circumstances of the conflict.

It is true that the weakening of state capacity in the context of deregulation

and privatization may be associated with the end of the 20th century as a specific change in the nature of the state. But the accompanying ideas of private armies, mercenaries, the informal economy, and criminal entrepreneurship are certainly not. And the processes associated with globalization that affect conflicts – a hallmark of the new wars thesis – existed throughout the 20th century. With the changes in the nature of the state – and the manifestations of this in contemporary war – the context of violence may have changed, but the underlying dynamics of that violence have not. Indeed, other forces resulted in the breakdown of public authority and order in earlier times, and this provided a similar dynamic in conflict. It may well be that certain circumstances have ‘blurred and dissolved conventional distinctions between peoples, armies and governments’ (Duffield, 2001: 13), but this is peculiar not to late 20th-century conflicts, but rather to weak and failing public authority throughout the 20th century – or indeed earlier times.

For example, the Congo civil war that erupted upon that country’s independence in 1960 could easily fit into the new wars model employed to explain post-Cold War phenomena (Abi-Saab, 1978; Gibbs, 1993; Urquhart, 1972). When Belgium withdrew, Congo suddenly experienced a breakdown of centralized government and order. The mineral-rich Katanga province in the south declared independence. Its leader, Moise Tshombe, had support among the Belgian industrial companies that mined copper, gold, and uranium in the province. The Belgian government and mining companies were covertly protecting their interests and promoting Katanga’s secession from behind the scenes. Both local fighting forces and foreign mercenaries were sustained and motivated by material aggrandizement. Economic interests, stimulated by transnational public and private networks, were key factors in both the core issue of the conflict (Katanga’s secession) and the dynamics of the violence. Simultaneously, various ethnic and regional rivalries came into play in the violence. Some of this violence was organized around clear political or ideological agendas – such as the unitary state under Patrice Lumumba vs. the breakaway Katangan state – but the conflict also included a myriad of local factions, warlords, and interests. The breakdown of public (colonial) authority provided the overall context of social breakdown and disorder. There was even a war economy logic of sorts, in the sense that the mercenaries had an interest in the continuation of conflict and the spoils this provided, both in terms of revenue from employers and in terms of profits from additional informal activities, such as trafficking weapons.

Many such characteristics also featured in the Nigeria–Biafra civil war of 1967–70, a tragic conflict involving the deliberate targeting of civilians by armed forces and militias, forced human displacement, ethnic hatred, private commercial interests, and private military forces (Sherman, 2002; Akpan, 1972; Uzokwe, 2003). Contemporary observers, seeing ‘the unprece-

dented massacre of one section of the country's population followed by an exodus of Jewish proportions' (de St. Jorre, 1972: 110), noted that 'the nature of the atrocities perpetrated baffles human understanding' (Forsyth, 1977: 80). And while the conflict is generally defined as the struggle of the ethnic Igbo people of the east in Biafra to secede from the federal Nigerian state, it was also an 'oil war' (de St. Jorre, 1972: 138–140). Indeed, one contemporary observer noted the 'struggle between the Nigerians and Biafrans over the lucrative revenues, with Shell/BP in the middle and the British government hovering like a worried nanny at the ringside' (de St. Jorre, 1972: 138).

Snow (1996: 109–112) observes a pattern in what he calls 'new internal wars': 'the apparent absence of clear military objectives that can be translated into coherent strategies and tactics', 'the degree of irregularity of the forces', 'the absence of even an appearance of military order and discipline', and 'the level of ferocity and even atrocity that is routinely committed in these conflicts'. Yet, this could be used to describe many earlier civil wars.

Implications and Conclusions

There are a number of possible explanations for the questionable idea of 'new wars' in the later part of the 20th century as a phenomenon distinct from earlier periods. In the academic world, it is useful to understand and disentangle two overlapping strands of analysis. The first is the new wars thesis itself: the argument that contemporary civil wars can be contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their 'goals, the methods of warfare and how they are financed' (Kaldor, 2001a: 6). The second is the improved empirical understanding of the dynamics of violent conflict, and especially the social and economic factors. This enhanced understanding has generally been applied to the contemporary era, where data are available, rather than to earlier periods, resulting in the impression that many of the factors associated with contemporary conflict are 'new', or at least exaggerating this impression. Thus, the problem with much of the literature is not in its analysis of contemporary conflict; rather, it is in suggesting that this is distinct from the past. It is essential to understand whether it is our approach and analysis that have changed, or the social reality, or both. I would argue that both have indeed changed, but the change in reality is not as great as that presented by much literature on wars and conflict. Clearly, historical, technological, and socio-economic changes have had an impact upon societies in many different ways. The nature and impact of conflict has changed in line with this. However, many so-called 'new' civil wars rather reflect types of conflict that are not particularly 'modern', and in fact reflect rather enduring patterns over the last century.

If we were to identify every variable or indicator associated with war and violent conflict in the 20th century – actors, objectives, spatial context, human impact, and the political economy and social structure of conflict – we would not be able to present a sustained, linear pattern in any of them. Rather, the changes are most obviously noticeable on a case-by-case basis. Thus, this article has sought to challenge a number of assumptions and theses that have emerged over the last ten years regarding the nature of conflict. To conclude, the article will consider the implications of this recent conflict analysis for policymakers and academia, and areas for further research.

First, in terms of scholarship, it is important for social scientists, and especially scholars of international relations, to embrace historical narrative in their research. Historical material, while often not constituting hard or quantitative data, provides an essential perspective when hard or quantitative data are not available. Moreover, even if historical material often does not have hard or quantitative data, this should not excuse analysts from using it, especially when making claims and comparisons based upon historical assumptions.

Second, the new wars literature, while exaggerating the peculiarities of contemporary conflict, has done a great service in deepening understanding of civil war. In particular, the literature on the social and economic dynamics of civil war offers rich insights for the security discourse, including human security. The orthodox definition of international security – premised on military defense of territory – puts human security and social factors at the periphery. Yet, international security can no longer be conceived of solely as defense of national territory against ‘external’ military threats under state control. The security agenda now incorporates political, economic, social, and even environmental dimensions, as well as the many linkages between them. Traditional security thinking has failed to deliver meaningful security to a significant proportion of the people of the world. This is an empirical reality. For most people, the greatest threats to security come from disease, hunger, environmental contamination, crime, and unorganized violence. For many, a still greater threat may come from their own state itself, rather than from an ‘external’ adversary. An established literature now exists to support this broad approach to human security (Commission on Human Security, 2003; Bajpai, 2000; Newman, 2001). The new wars agenda points us in the right direction for understanding the links between human insecurity and violent conflict. An active research agenda is addressing a range of research questions in this area, exploring the links between violence and factors such as socio-economic inequality, divided societies, human rights abuse, poverty, migration, economic disruptions, diaspora communities, and international commodity markets.

Finally, current research on war, particularly civil war, has clear implications for state sovereignty, and these need to be explored further. Sovereign

statehood remains a core characteristic of the international system. However, the legalist model of international politics – premised upon sovereign autonomy, control of territory, sovereign equality, and non-interference – seems to be demonstrably out of touch with reality in a number of respects. Civil wars – often in the context of state failure – provide the starkest demonstration of this reality. It has long been acknowledged that sovereignty has never been an absolute principle: encroachments upon sovereignty have always taken place, and yet the institution is upheld as a form of ‘organized hypocrisy’ (Krasner, 1999). However, the gap between empirical and juridical sovereignty has become acute in circumstances of war and state failure. There are a number of reasons for this. International norms regarding human rights now significantly condition state sovereignty and go beyond the voluntary nature of international human rights instruments. The legitimacy of state sovereignty rests not only on control of territory and recognition, but also upon fulfilling certain standards of human rights and welfare for citizens. As a corollary, the sovereignty of states that are unwilling or unable to fulfill certain basic standards may be jeopardized. Situations of civil war are cases of this. The use of military force for human protection purposes (the emerging, though contested, norm of ‘humanitarian intervention’) is the starkest example of this trend (Newman, 2002).

State sovereignty traditionally implies control of territory, along with independence and reciprocal recognition among states. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold the idea of sovereignty in cases where states are unwilling or unable to uphold even the most basic foundations of the institution of sovereignty, especially when such cases can have serious negative repercussions across borders. Again, civil wars and state failure provide a clear demonstration of this. When a viable public authority and control cease to exist, the rights and needs of citizens cannot be met and interstate relations cannot be meaningfully pursued. A lack of control over territory and cross-border movements of illegal activities and forced human migration affects other states and significantly undermines claims for non-intervention and territorial inviolability. At the beginning of the 21st century, it is necessary to acknowledge a controversial and perhaps uncomfortable reality: the concept of equality of state legitimacy – that all states are endowed with equal rights to legal respect, sovereign prerogatives, and inviolable territorial integrity – is not universally accepted. While it was once politically difficult to even raise the idea of trusteeships for regions that defy sovereign responsibility, today the idea may be unavoidable. Research on violent conflict should be approached within this broader normative context.

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