

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #2

MARTIN SHAW ON THE DIALECTICS OF WAR AND THE WORLD STATE

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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MARTIN SHAW ON THE DIALECTICS OF WAR AND THE WORLD STATE



Martin Shaw is a historical sociologist of war and global politics, having published on war, the concept of a global state, globalization and civil society. He has been professor of International Relations and Politics at the University of Sussex since 1995. In this talk, amongst others, he challenges Doyle's vision on the 'liberal peace' as laid out in [Theory Talk #1](#).

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR?

I see two, linked main challenges to IR as it continues to become an ever more important area of the social sciences. The first is to move beyond its traditional self-definition as the study of international *politics* to become a genuinely interdisciplinary field of global social science, including political economy, sociology and cultural theory. The second is to redefine the nature of international politics in the light of the global transformations of state power and of political action more generally.

What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I believe that we need to grasp the historical transformations of world economy, culture, politics and armed conflict that are producing a global society. Although the 'globalization' debate of the 1990s has been partially eclipsed since 9/11, the forces that are globalizing our world are still very much at work. Unlike many scholars who see global change as economically and culturally driven, so that political changes are the results of these processes, I believe that political conflicts, and especially wars, have been major historical drivers of global change. This continues to be the case.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I studied sociology in the 1960s, and initially adopted a critical Marxist approach. In the late 1970s I became interested in war as a topic, which has remained a core issue for me, and I found Marxist approaches fundamentally unsatisfactory for explaining war. I moved to a more Weberian historical-sociological position, which remains my core approach. In the 1990s I became interested in IR – finding that approaches to global change in sociology gave insufficient attention to the political and military aspects – and so took an IR chair at Sussex, where I still am. In recent years I've extended my interest in war into the emerging area of genocide studies. I think IR has a lot to contribute to this area but the potential has not been realized.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?

To become an IR scholar, a student needs both a strong commitment to world issues and a commitment to serious scholarship – a passion for ideas and a willingness to engage meticulously with facts and arguments are both essential.

'Genocide is the continuation of politics by other means.' Can you explain your insistence in the 'dialectics of war?' 'Classical' (neorealist / neoliberal) theory goes that war between liberal states is not viable and that they are more pacific than 'the others'. Who's still benefiting from it? Is economy the continuation of war by other means?

These are big and diverse questions, so I may not be able to answer them all fully. War and genocide are both continuations of politics – war, as Clausewitz suggested, may be seen as politics by other means, and genocide, it seems to me, is war with other enemies (civilian social groups rather than armed enemies). My 'dialectics of war' idea suggests that war, however, is not just a mechanical continuation of politics: rather the forms of armed conflict affect the underlying political conflict and its outcomes. Wars – whether world wars or local conflicts – involve distinctive social relations of their own which produce profound feedbacks into social life generally.

The idea that war between liberal (or democratic) states is not viable is based, in my view, on a rather shallow perception. In today's world, many liberal-democratic states are liberal democracies for the same reason that their mutual relations are peaceful – they have been incorporated into the US-led Western bloc and their military power has been largely subsumed into its structures. Unfortunately many democratizing states are anything but peaceful – genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia was linked to democratization conflicts – and some established liberal democratic states use military power all too recklessly as we have seen in Iraq. Their leaders seek to benefit politically, as well as economically, but civilians in conflict zones are consistent losers.

Alexander Wendt argues that a World State is inevitable. You argued in 2000, however, that we are in a trap with regards to 'globalization as the process towards a global state'. What are your thoughts on the subject right now?

What has been emerging in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been a global network of state power, including all states to a greater or lesser extent, at the centre of which stands what I have called the 'Western-global state conglomerate', comprising the interlocked state institutions of the Western states and international organizations. Since 2001, however, we've seen what I've called 'regressive globalism' – particularly the attempt of the Bush administration to marshal other states and the UN into aggressive war and its aftermath. This strategy has increased the strains on global state networks, producing greater differences within the West and between the West and the emerging great power, China. So although global state developments continue, the problem of legitimacy is deepened, and the capacity to meet global challenges (e.g. climate change) fails to develop sufficiently.

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- [Martin Shaw's Homepage](#)
- [Profile and articles at openDemocracy](#)
- Read the Key Chapter of his 2003 book *War and Genocide* [here](#)
- Visit the Global Site [here](#), of which Shaw is editor