Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #30

MARY KALDOR ON FRAMING WAR, THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, AND HUMAN SECURITY

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

MARY KALDOR ON FRAMING WAR, THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, AND HUMAN SECURITY

The end of the Cold War sent a shockwave through both the practice of international politics and the study thereof. We moved from a Cold War and old wars to a world of new wars, where, in a context of globalization and balkanization, the social relations of violent conflict have changed profoundly. While this has been partly accepted, it also led to somewhat of a stalemate in IR. In this seminal *Talk***, Mary Kaldor helps making sense out of our rapidly changing world, by showing that the world is still very much organized according to clear logics. She – amongst others – shows how war is very much about framing; she challenges us to see governance as a fit between the organization of capital and coercion; and she argues that if the EU wants to be an international actor, it should center its policy agenda on human security.**

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? And what is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

Everything is changing so dramatically that I think the central challenge is whether International Relations is a subject at all, to tell you the truth. We are witnessing a shift from international relations to global politics. By that, I mean that in stead of settling things in the traditional way, based on the inside-outside convention which is so typical of international relations as a discipline, where the inside is politics and the outside is strategy and diplomacy, more and more of what counted as the outside is becoming politics and more and more involves not just states, but also non-state actors, civil society groups and so on. On the other hand, what happens inside our borders is increasingly treated by foreign ministries and the army. We're in a moment of tremendous flux where lots of critical ideas that ten years ago were seen as very challenging are now widely accepted.

Whether it's critical security approaches, whether it's the importance of multilateralism… all of these things seem more broadly accepted than they used to be, say, ten years ago: there's more and more acceptance that we're moving towards a world of global politics, and yet, oddly enough, because this is the way this discipline is taught – especially in the United States – many people in the field remain within realist assumptions and realist ways of doing things. So while in a way it is not a debate, it is still a challenge to start working with what are now accepted new concepts. For instance, to give you an example from my own experience: I find that a lot of people, while they are willing to accept that contemporary conflicts have changed and that the main conflicts that

they are concerned with are what I call new wars, they are not willing to accept that this requires a new approach. I have been reading a lot of American literature and they regard new wars as something to approach from within the traditional counter-insurgency literature on national liberation. They still think there is a world of traditional geopolitics and I think perhaps that is the biggest debate, or the biggest idea to be challenged.

The other big challenge, I suppose, is to think discursively – and thereby I mean that the biggest debate is or should be about constructivism, really. There's an important debate between people who have different interpretative understandings of social science and those who have an explanatory understanding, and I think that that's in a way the biggest debate going on at the moment. The main idea that social constructivist approaches have added, is that how you frame things shapes how you find solutions in social sciences. So much in those sciences is about identifying human motivations and that is impossible to establish objectively. What you *can* do is try to find interpretations that enable you to act and to reflect upon your practice, to see how helpful your interpretation actually was.

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

A lot of it is very personal. I'd have go right back to my childhood: my background is that I am half Hungarian and that my uncle was a dissident in Hungary in prison during the 1950s. At the same time, however, my mother was an active member of the Labor Party and a peace activist, and somehow I had to find a way of reconciling these two sides of my family. So I think that from a very early age I was against nuclear weapons and had an active interest in the peace tradition. At the same time, I had this very uneasy feeling that people who are involved in peace activism weren't really concerned about issues like human rights and the problem of communism in Eastern Europe. So somehow I wanted to bring those two things together.

Then, I was myself very involved in peace activism, and when I left university, I got a job at SIPRI (the Swedish International Peace Research Institute) and there my job was (because of my undergraduate diploma in economics) to construct the Arms Trade Statistics – and funnily enough, as I look back on my career, that's one of the things I'm most proud of, because it is still being used today. And through that, I got very interested in the defense industry, arms trade, military technology, which lasted for about ten years. In the 1980s the peace movement surged in Europe, in which I then got really involved. I was really inspired by two people in that context: one is the historian E.P. Thomson who talked a lot about 'history from below', and another was Mient Jan Faber, a Dutch peace activist who had worked a lot on aspects of Eastern Europe that I was interested in.

As a result of that, some of us started the Helsinki Citizens Assembly (hCa) the idea of which was to help civil society in difficult places and to work together across the East-West divide. I got tremendously involved in Yugoslavia and Bosnia, because branches of the hCa were started, and being there led to all my work on new wars.

So in the end the most important ingredients for the dish that I became would have been family experience; some very important people such as Edward Thomson; and the experience of being a peace and human rights activist.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

I do think, as you see from my own experience, that activism is very important. And then it's also important *what kind* of activism. Quite contrary to the general academic view which hold that if you're too political you'll become less objective, I think activism forces you to be very objective because you have to get your arguments right and you can't twist them as it suits you. You can always be publicly challenged. But related to activism is the ability to be reflexive and to reflect on what you do and what you do wrong, in short, to think about your own behavior and ideas very critically. Imagine yourself in somebody else's shoes. That's tightly linked to what I denoted as the constructivist challenge to IR: how do people make decisions? Where does change actually come from? Where does agency reside?

There's an old fashioned view that change comes from above, that leaders make decisions, change policies, and that view holds that leaders simply decided that the Cold War was over. I think change actually sort of bubbles up through discursive practice, through dialogue, discourses, the way people talk about things. Leaders cannot uphold a Cold War or War on Terror if nobody believes their discourse – such ideas have to be upheld by societies at large. Look, for instance, at how everybody has changed their views on climate change. That hasn't come because some politician decides so; it is rather the politicians that have been dragged into this.

And for a student it is very important not to get caught up in appealing narratives that are projected on global politics afterwards, but to try and scrutinize what's going on as closely as possible. Seeing actors in practice forces you to put yourself in their place, and this, in turn, creates a deep understanding of political and social reality.

You have been writing about the changes the nature in the social relations of warfare has gone through since the end of the Cold War, starting out with your famous book *New and Old Wars*. Things have been turbulent since and, for instance, private security actors are rife. Has the Old War forever faded?

Well I certainly think that 'old war' has faded, but I'm not sure if it has *forever* faded – let me qualify that. Many people see the shift from traditional, standing army warfare to different kind of warfare occurring at the end of the Cold War, but if one observes closely, it is actually after the Second World War that old wars have become very, very rare. And I think there are clear reasons for that. One reason is something we experienced in the Second World War, which is that military technology has simply become too destructive to be used in symmetrical ways. Nuclear war is, I think, a metaphor for the destructiveness of war in general.

Another reason, which I think is something we're often not aware of, is that globalization (which is I think greater human consciousness) has profoundly constrained the possibility of atrocities and war. This has to do with the whole social construction and perception issue of politics I referred to. Just to give you an example: when Israel attacked Gaza most people were completely horrified. I remember one of my friends rung me up and said: 'don't they think Palestinians are humans?' And I said: 'no, of course not, this is war.' You don't think the other side is human in a war. But my friend said: 'but surely we thought the Germans were humans in the Second World War…' To which I replied: 'no, we didn't; we killed about one or two hundred thousand in a single night in Hamburg and Dresden!' So what we did in the Second World War was actually far worse than what the Israelis did in Gaza. *But* nowadays the context is changed by this hugely changed consciousness (an effect or essential element of globalization) – it's simply unacceptable to do something like killing 200.000 overnight nowadays. Now, of course, given that this contemporary condition has to do with human consciousness, implies that the situation can change again, depending largely on how we frame things – just like it was possible for Hitler to

re-invent slavery after it had been abolished. I hope, of course, that such conflicts and practices are a thing of the past, and I hope particularly with new technologies that we will always have this sensitivity. But nevertheless you can never rule out the possibility.

This leads me to ask you a meta-question: are you basically optimist or pessimist about human nature and/or the nature of social interactions on a large scale (like, for instance, the level of global politics)? Is politics the fight to curb negative tendencies in human nature or are we empowering the good that people inherently do?

Well, do you know the famous phrase of Antonio Gramsci, who called for 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'? I think that's a very good description of how one ought to feel. One ought to be very clear about the negative sides of human relationships, and the huge difficulties of changing human relationships. But I also think one ought to be positive about what human beings will do given the right conditions and trying to create the conditions in which human beings can solve problems though debate and reason rather than through violence and struggle. That seems to me the key thing. So in one sense I am optimistic: if you create the conditions through which people can have free debate then they will come up with reasonable solutions. But creating those conditions is extremely difficult.

Is new war still war? Because if it isn't, then responding to it by military means might not be the right answer.

I think that's a very good question and a very difficult one to answer. In my book on old wars and new wars, I said that new wars are essentially a mixture between *war* (by which I mean political conflict, conflict between two politically organized groups, for a political cause), *crime* (with which I mean using violence for private motives) and *human rights violations* (which means aggression against individuals). New wars are thus a kind of mixture of spheres previously separated analytically, but, importantly, there is always a political dimension in the sense that the parties to the conflict very often frame what they do in political terms. And insofar as they do that, they see themselves primarily as fighting a war, which in turn legitimizes what they do (because, remember, war is really 'legitimized killing'). So if you're saying 'I'm doing this for national liberation' rather than 'I'm doing this because I want money or power' it somehow sounds a little bit better. You can observe this with the suicide bombers in Britain: when they gave their explanations on video, that they define themselves as soldiers. They describe the situation in which their agency should be understood as war, they frame things in a political way, because politics is a commonly accepted motive for violence.

Different ways of framing different types of violence imply different solutions or different ways of addressing the problem. If we frame violence as war, it has to be addressed in terms of international relations and military answers. Another option would be to frame terrorism and other new wars as a crime or as banditry. The implication of the latter option is that these phenomena should be dealt with through law enforcement and policing.

Now that 'small' difference in framing, changes everything: it's the difference between high and low politics, between what is commonly defined as a threat to the national state or rather a threat to public safety, and, ultimately, a difference between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the state. If we decide to call terrorism or ethnic conflicts war, then it actually legitimized the terrorist or the ethnic cleanser as an enemy or a warring party and can lead to the destructive, and often counter-productive, use of force. That is why it is better to emphasize the rule of law and law enforcement and treat such people as criminals.

At the same time, framing something as non-political and thus as a matter of law enforcement sometimes does create problems as well: in Northern Ireland the British said 'we're doing law enforcement', so they treated the IRA prisoners just like ordinary criminals. That led to problems like the hunger strike in the H-block, and in the end the British had to give in and allow the IRA prisoners to be treated as political prisoners, and in the end they then had to deal with the conflict through talks *as though* they were serious political issues to be debated.

I do however think that politics is going to be part of the solution: politics means negotiation and contestation, but also developing an alternative political framework based on inclusive ideas instead of exclusive labels.

A question about the Cold War. In your book *the Imaginary War* you argue that security elites in the East and West framed the other as a threat, not because they were convinced of the danger of the other, but rather to manage internal conflict in their own spheres. Can you explain that?

To start with your last question: absolutely. David Keen's new book *Endless War: Hidden Functions of the War on Terror* (2006, read a related piece by Keen here) illustrates this very well. My argument was that the Cold War was an imaginary war. In other words, it wasn't peace, it was as though the Second World War hadn't ended, and in our imagination we fought something like the Second World War over and again, with imaginary attacks across the German plains, and with all the elements of war yet without the actual fighting.

Somehow, during the Second World War, both the West and the Soviet Union figured out and resolved the problems that they faced in the preceding period. The West discovered the advantages of big government and how to solve the problems of unemployment, and the Soviet Union discovered how to be efficient, because central planning had been very inefficient. And in fact the socialist system, I argue, wasn't a socialist system but rather a war-economy system. And the military-industrial complex that constituted the core of post-war economic growth in the US, is a micro-cosmos of a war economy. And so basically these two systems benefited in their own way from this re-alignment, which permitted the particular restructuring of the societies, polities and economies internal to their spheres of influence. The Cold War was essentially a mutual enterprise in which both sides kept each other going. And that worked out quite well, considering the phase of economic development we had then reached, with a system based on Fordist mass production that allowed for mass consumption in the West and mass armament in the East.

That all worked well until the Vietnam war – that war began to challenge the imaginary war story, but it was also kind of the moment when the Cold War stopped producing economic growth as it had done in the 50s and 60s. So the Cold War started to falter and you had détente and that didn't work because nobody believed any longer in the reasons for the continuing arms race when they saw their leaders kissing each other. And so then you had the new Cold War, and gradually the whole thing began to disintegrate. So my view on the Cold War, as I tried to present it in that book, incorporates very much a sort of constructivist argument about the link between what was until then primarily seen as a political division leading to a territorial division of the world into two militarily guarded zones and the internal social, political and economic organization linked to that military division.

Interesting, so there was a territorial governance 'fit' between the organization of both capital and military coercion during the Cold War. It seems that that fit existed, too, during the 19th century: war used to be predominantly a national territorial issue, concerning national security, and the economy was also being consolidated and

organized in national terms. Then, during the Cold War, the world got organized in a bipolar way, both economically and militarily as you argue. After the Cold War, emphasis shifted towards human security, non-territorial threats and interventions using expeditionary forces. Is there now also a fit between capital and coercion?

Not yet. As I argue in a recent piece, *Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars and the War or Terror* (see links below), Bush has tried very desperately to have a Cold War again – and the War on Terror was a way to kind of re-invent the Cold War. And Bush needed that, because the story the US has invented about itself was that the US uses its superior technology to bring democracy to the rest of the world and to fight against enemies, which not only maintains the military-industrial complex but also works as a story people can believe in and can support, which creates legitimacy for the government and its policies. So somehow they had to renew that story and the War on Terror gave them a wonderful opportunity to attempt to recreate a world that worked. In a sense, it has become politics as usual to find a common enemy for the US.

And I think that what you point at here is the central point of the global crisis with which we as of yet have to come to terms with: there is currently no fit between the organization of capital and coercion outside of the imagination of the former US administration, or rather, there *is* a fit but it just isn't the one that has been sold to us in the whole War on Terror-discourse. To understand what the fit *does* look like, I think it is crucial to understand that money is actually a construction, and it's an expression of power relations. The fact that the dollar was the most important international currency was very much linked to American military power and American power in organizing the bipolar system. The US in a way was using its military and monetary power to obstruct rather than to facilitate the functioning of the world economy. The US basically had a huge debt and was sucking in money from the rest of the world. So I think that this is what this crisis is all about, and I think solving the crisis really involves changes in the organization of security as well as a change in international finance and the use of currencies. China is making the same point when they called for transfers of money to the IMF and creating a real international currency rather than using the dollar or any other national currency, which empowers too much one single political entity, and thus also distorts political and military relations. But indeed, since the organization of capital and violence are linked, the creation of an international currency would mean a significant decrease in the capacity of the US to project military power abroad.

I'd like to ask you something more about the 'military-industrial complex' you mentioned earlier. In 1959, Samuel Huntington wrote about how the military industry came into being after the Second World War; in 1961, Eisenhower warned us about it, and one could say that it was some kind of 'infant industry' protected until about the 70s when the world economy got restructured and the market became increasingly the forum for exchange of (American) military technology.

Often, military technology is labeled as a source of innovation for society – things like mobile phones and internet are said to be military technologies that have spilled over to society. During wartime, military technology can also have innovative effects for warring parties, because in war the technology gets tested. It's what the market is in peacetime. However, military technology has another aspect to it as well: in peacetime, you have no way of testing what kind of technology is efficient. In war, you get defeated if your technology isn't effective; in peace, and particularly in the Cold War, all that mattered was that you had to *imagine* that you were fighting a war, but actual fighting hardly took place, so innovations didn't get tested. Yet both parties to the conflict kept emphasising innovation and felt the urge to match the perceived innovative threat often in a very involuted way. I argue that if you trace the innovation on both sides it is as though both

were arming not against each other but against a phantom German army. So military technology became more and more complicated, and more and more divorced from civilian technology. That's one of the reasons why, although American productivity did grow because of the stimulus of military spending, it didn't become increasingly productive, and this is essentially why many American products are (still) uncompetitive. New military technology, based on innovations that are not actually tested in war situations, created a drag on the American and British economies, absorbing important skills and pulling technology along what one might call a degenerate evolution. I have labeled these technologies as baroque, more and more expensive and elaborate and less and less useful, in the *Baroque Arsenal*, a book I published in 1981.

But that doesn't mean that the military-industrial-complex hasn't been hugely powerful politically.. Take the Israel lobby, it's much better to understand it in terms of a military-industrial complex, which is increasingly very much internationalized and both Israel and Britain are deeply integrated into the American military-industrial complex. But an even more worrying aspect is you now have the added dimension of private security companies. The old military-industrial complex was interested in making weapons and wasn't essentially interested in war but rather in a permanent arms-race to create a permanent and stable market; in fact war was rather bad for it, because in war their clients would discover – and that's exactly what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan – that the technology is baroque: too expensive and too complicated to actually use. Actually now there's a huge restructuring going on in the US military, and many of these complex systems that kept the military-industrial complex alive are being canceled, which has a huge impact on the big, traditional American defense contractors. But now you get this other dimension of the newly emerging network that also consists of private security service providers, who benefit from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the one hand, you have traditional companies of the military-industrial complex with their over-complex weapon systems that are interested in producing useless weapons systems but not in war. On the other hand, you have new companies whose income essentially depends on the ongoing war. That's terribly worrying to me.

You've been involved in the reflection upon the European human security doctrine. Does a European emphasis on human security not inhibit its development as an independent international actor (that could reinforce its political position with military might), and thus actually reflect its dependency on external interests through the NATO?

I think exactly the opposite. I think the only way that Europe can become an international actor is if it has a human security agenda. I think so for several reasons. First of all, as we know from the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, you can't actually any longer defend your interest through conventional military forces. Secondly, the EU is a new kind of actor. It's not a traditional nation-state, but rather a new kind of polity, and its security policy has to reflect the nature of that distinctiveness. The EU started of course as a peace project, as a way of bringing together the countries of Europe, and its way of acting independently in our world has to be to try and extend the peace project. And the way you extend the peace project is through human security – which might well mean that you need military forces, because sometimes there are cases when protecting individuals requires repelling aggression. But it means you are using military forces in a completely different way: not to defend European interests, except insofar as European interests are in global security, but rather to defend ordinary people on the ground. And normally those military forces would be used together with policemen and other civilians. We call that a human security force in our doctrine rather than a military force. And then there's a third argument, which is that I think the European project will never be popular if it is seen as a new military superpower. That's what we saw in the French 'no': the French Left combined with the xenophobic Right to defeat the European project because they thought it was neoliberal and

militaristic, and I think the same was the case with the Irish, and I think that only if you can convince them that what Europe is doing is human security and not militaristic, will you get the Left on board.

But then one could argue that 'human security' linked to intervention is a new way of playing the governance game, in which the world is to confirm to our conception European of security, as for instance Mark Duffield does.

While I really enjoyed Mark Duffield's book *Security, Development and Unending War*, I think it is too negative. There is something very seductive about his argument that we have human rights at home and human (in)security abroad, in which human security approaches are viewed as a way of mitigating the terrible consequences of our exclusive consumerism and social insurance policies. But then you ask: what is the alternative, and I think the real problem is that for him there's no middle position between imperial intervention and global revolution. When you look at his alternative, he talks vaguely about solidarity and I think there just has to be a middle position, or at least we have to *believe* in the existence of a middle position, which for me is reflected in a human security agenda, which I would argue is not imperialist because it has to be executed within a multilateralist framework based on the equality of human beings. And we simply can't use conventional warfare, our actions have to be different, and that's how I understand the middle position.

But then there's the incapacity of the 'international community' to intervene when it's necessary, or, as you call it in your book *Reflections on globalization and human security*, the 'security gap' flowing from our conception of human security and the daily fear of violence of millions worldwide. And one way to close this gap is the way Mark Duffield criticizes, namely, by letting the invisible hand of the aid 'market' tackle the gap. How do you see role of the increasing non-state aid, development and security 'industry'?

I think it is quite worrying, actually. Perhaps I'm simply somewhat old-fashioned, but I think there are certain things you just can't leave to be governed by the market, and especially security is one of them. I think there are huge problems with private security companies and with NGOs: there is this terrible contracting culture that is built around international missions, which wastes enormous amounts of money through layer upon layer upon layer of contracts. If somebody is contracted to build a school, and they subcontract it, and each subcontractor takes their part, and by the time we get to the school, there's no money left. The NGOs, furthermore, are often more worried about their donors than about the ones they're building the school for. So there are all kinds of problems that are related to the privatization culture. On the other hand, I don't think that at this point you can do without these entities, because there simply isn't the capacity on a national or global scale to engage in those projects, as you point out. I mean, even parts of the UN, such as UNDP, are forced to get their money not from states but from foundations and other donors, which makes them just as worried as NGOs about their donors, and inhibits effective problem-solving. But I think hard security issues, anything to do with war fighting, anything related to using guns, should be kept out of the private sphere, which the Americans didn't do in Iraq and Afghanistan, as Peter Singer shows in *Theory Talk # 29*.

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include *The Baroque Arsenal* (1982) *The Imaginary War* (1990) *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (1999) *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (2003). She was a founder member of European Nuclear Disarmament (END), founder and Co-Chair of the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly, and a member of the International Independent Commission to investigate the Kosovo Crisis, established by the Swedish Prime Minister and chaired by Richard Goldstone, which published the *Kosovo Report* (Oxford: OUP) in autumn 2000. Mary Kaldor was also convenor of the study group on European Security Capabilities established at the request of Javier Solana, which produced the Barcelona report, 'A Human Security Doctrine for Europe' and in 2007 the follow-up report, *A European Way of Security: The Madrid Report of the Human Security Study Group*.

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- *Read Kaldor's lecture Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars and the War on Terror* (2005) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Kaldor's UNDP Human Development Report Background Paper *Civil Society and Accountability* (2002) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Martin, Selchow, and Kaldor's *Human Security: A European Strategic Narrative* (2008) [here](#) (pdf)
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