

Walls, War and Globalisation

Editorial for the special issue: Globalisation and War

At the inaugural event of the *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, held at Royal Holloway University on 3 September 2009, keynote speaker Costas Douzinas waved a copy of the first issue of the journal in the air, and stated that what he was holding was 'the materialisation of ideology.' The meaning of this comment, put in language that is characteristic of Douzinas' philosophical affiliations, should be clear: through labour, the idea at the basis of the *JCGS* manifested itself in tangible form, culminating in the first issue of this new journal. In essence there is nothing particularly unique about this. Every written piece or work of art has to go through a process of transformation into reality; it can perhaps be said that its ultimate value depends on the soundness and distinctiveness of the original idea, the quality of the labour put into its realisation and, ultimately, the degree of correspondence between the idea and its mundane manifestation. The role of writers or artists is thus, so to speak, to make the shadows on the walls of Plato's cave resemble as closely as possible that which they hoped to communicate to their audience. In the case of an academic journal, with various contributing authors, things appear to be a bit less straightforward, but the same principle applies, as the editors are responsible for setting a framework and a mechanism of selection to enable the realisation and fruition of thought on a particular theme. A few words on the idea that underpins this second issue, which deals with the topic of *Globalisation and War*, are therefore in place.

The publication of the current issue coincides with the end of the 'noughties' and the start of the 2010s. During such symbolic shifts, people are typically wont to look back, reflect upon the past and ask the question: what lessons can we learn from the last 10 years? Whilst euphoric observers in the West generally regarded the 90s as a period of peace, mostly in light of the end of the Cold War and the apparent victory of unfettered free market capitalism, no one would harbour such illusions about the first decade of the 21st century. Few people would disagree that no region stands more vivid testimony to this truth than the (wider) Middle East. In September 2000, Ariel Sharon visited the *Haram as-Sharif* in Jerusalem and

unchained the Second or *Al-Aqsa* intifada in Palestine. The intifada revealed fully how naïve it had been to trust in a settlement so deeply flawed as the Oslo agreements, and Israel's answer was unambiguous, as its actions over the last 10 years have made abundantly clear. Now, with the existence of an eight metre high concrete wall cutting through Palestinian land, the ever-continuing expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank and the torturous blockade of Gaza there is little that could inspire hope for a solution to this long drawn-out conflict.

The Palestinians were not the only ones, however, who suffered the full effects of the political complacency of the 90s. One year after Sharon's provocative act 'the desert of the Real' traumatically revealed itself in the West, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, and the dream of an 'end of history' was shattered by the two planes that flew into the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001. Shortly afterwards, President Bush unleashed the 'War on Terror,' the first manifestation of which was the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. The war was originally justified as an effort to root out Al-Qaeda and capture Osama Bin Laden, but in the absence of success its rhetoric and orientation quickly changed to defeating the Taliban and providing 'security and stability' to the Afghans by strengthening the post-Taliban government. We are now almost a decade further, and Robert Fisk described the current situation as follows: "now we have the venal, corrupt, sectarian Karzai in power after a poll far more ambitiously rigged than the Iranian version, and – yup, we love him dearly and accept his totally fraudulent election" (*The Independent*, 4 November 2009). The familiar problems involved with installing a despotic ruler to 'pacify' a violently chaotic situation are clearly present: in its 2009 report (on developments in 2008) Human Rights Watch concluded that "Afghanistan is experiencing its worst violence since the fall of the Taliban government. Widespread human rights abuses, warlordism, and impunity persist, with a government that lacks the strength or will to institute necessary reforms." More recently, the Afghanistan Rights Monitor released a statement that in 2009 at least three children had died per day in suicide attacks, roadside blasts, airstrikes and in the crossfire between the various forces present in Afghanistan, calling it the 'worst year for children' (*IRIN News*, 6 January 2010). Given President Obama's recent commitment to send more troops to the country, this provides a menacing look into how this 'good war' (as some have called it) might further escalate and bring catastrophe to the Afghans.

Of course, there was also the attack on Iraq in 2003, which was preceded and accompanied by some of the most blatant lies to have been uttered by politicians in recent history. Tony Blair's admission that he 'would have done it anyway' was of course completely unsurprising; it is widely understood that the only proper attitude with regards to the whole sordid affair is utter cynicism. Perhaps

Reinhold Niebuhr was right when he said that “special privileges make all men dishonest,” which is why those in power always ought to be distrusted (1932 [2005], p. 107). Such cynicism is certainly sustained by some of the images of the 21st century that have been accessible on TV and the internet, such as the mafia-like execution of Saddam Hussein or the beheadings of foreigners in Iraq and Afghanistan – the inglorious effigies of a decade of war. Lest we forget, there were also the pornographic photographs of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, to name but the best-known sites, typified most famously by Lynndie England giving the thumbs up as naked Iraqi prisoners were being forced into various deeply humiliating positions.

Violence was not restricted to the Middle East, though, as was made painfully clear by conflicts in e.g. Darfur and Sri Lanka. In addition, there was the global economic meltdown, which saw vast amounts of money spent on ‘bailing out’ banks, accompanied by meaningless condemnations of ‘greedy bankers’ – as if the greed of a few individuals was really the problem. Howard Zinn put it succinctly: “It’s not the rotten apples, it’s the barrel” (*Naked Punch*, 6 August 2009). A similar argument was put forward by Noam Chomsky, who pointed out that crises and bailouts have always been a regular feature of state capitalism; the latest cycle was remarkable only because of its unusually large scale. But then again, such enlargement appears to be a characteristic feature of today’s world – a topic to which we will return shortly.

Altogether it seems that the politics of the 21st century so far have rendered extremely credible Foucault’s claim that ‘politics is the continuation of war by other means.’ Should we therefore be surprised that young people in the West have expressed their resentment through nihilism and ‘divine violence’ – as exemplified by the riots in Greece in December 2008? Indeed, Walter Benjamin’s notion of divine violence, understood here as the destructive antithesis of existing law, having no inherent meaning but the relentless expression of resentment, appears to be appropriate, for such is the faithlessness of many young people in the current political system that they make no demands on it, and see hope only in its downfall. Whilst anarchist groups like those active in Greece are altogether marginal, they are significant in that they are the strongest manifestation of the anger, despair and cynicism of a large part of our current generation. The fact that the American band *Rage Against the Machine* bizarrely made it to number one in the 2009 UK Christmas charts with their 1992 song ‘Killing In The Name Of,’ which repeats the words “fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me” numerous times, is thus highly symbolic.

Having mentioned divine violence, the wider problem of sovereignty in the 21st century is touched upon (as Benjamin writes: “divine violence ... may be called ‘sovereign’ violence”; 1996, p. 252). What is sovereign about divine violence

for Benjamin is its solitary nature; like Hobbes' Leviathan it stands outside the order of morality, the law or the social contract – it has no Big Other to ask for help (Žižek, 2009). For some, however, there is no longer a Big Other in today's world; there is no overarching symbolic order to, as it were, give meaning to our lives. It is here that 'globalisation' enters our discussion, for, as alluded to previously, its defining feature is the ever-increasing scale on which our lives take place (as seen in communication, economics and politics, but also ethics and 'consciousness'). In a political sense, this has been most clearly visible in the way in which nation states have been 'criss-crossed and undermined,' as Ulrich Beck (2000) put it – a process which has been said to have had profound impact on the nature of sovereignty. In this light it has been argued that established concepts like the nation state are increasingly under pressure. For some, as Saskia Sassen put it in a widely quoted passage, globalisation consists of the denationalisation of various micro-processes, "whether policies, capital, political subjectivity, urban spaces, temporal frames, or any other of a variety of dynamics and domains" (2006, p. 1). Aside from explicitly global enterprises such as the WTO, Sassen notes the increasing importance of transboundary networks and formations, thus pointing to the multifariousness of 'globalisation.' As a result of these developments, she argues, "[sovereignty's] institutional insertion and its capacity to legitimate and absorb all legitimating power, to be the source of law, have become unstable. The politics of contemporary sovereignties are far more complex than notions of mutually exclusive territorialities can capture" (ibid., p. 415).

From these observations we can conclude that one of the key concepts related to globalisation is sovereignty. Yet it is impossible to discuss sovereignty without taking into account the issue of violence. After all, as particularly Schmitt and Agamben have shown, the expression of sovereignty *par excellence* lies in the exception, the sovereign decision to temporarily discard the law and to take life. This implies that there must be strong conceptual and practical connections between the (political) effects of globalisation, on the one hand, and violence/war – the supreme expression of sovereignty – on the other. The peculiarities of the violence of the 21st century thus far might illustrate this claim, with the continuation and escalation of 'the last colonial war' in Palestine, the erection of new walls in Europe, Israel and the US to defend against 'the Others,' the endless battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan, torture or rendition of 'enemy combatants,' and the ever-present fear of the terrorist 'enemy within.' The truth of globalisation, it seems, must be sought in the new walls and the new wars of this century – a stark refutation of the perpetual peace promised by liberals and proponents of (economic) globalisation and cosmopolitanism.

One final remark that must be made here concerns the term 'war,' as a

number of scholars have recently argued that the distinction between war and peace has become obsolete. Instead, they say, the wars of the 21st century indicate a perpetual state of exception, some kind of morbid realisation of Orwell's motto 'War is Peace.' In this view, the instances of violence of the recent decade must be understood as either clashes between *homini sacer* – the sacred/cursed individuals who cannot be sacrificed yet who may be killed with impunity – or police actions by the powers of the new world order to control those seditious counter forces who are bent upon disturbing their peace, freedom and democracy. In this sense, a constant battle is being fought, a never-ending exception to 'the normal' which has itself become the norm. In the traditional Hobbesian sense we might therefore posit that war has become the regular state of affairs: "as the nature of foul weather, lieth not in a shower or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many days together: so the nature of war, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary" (Leviathan, 13:8).

In light of these aporiae, the current special issue of this journal must be seen as a direct response to, on the one hand, the violence of the last decade and its overturning of the claim that history had reached an end, and, on the other hand, the theoretical link between globalisation, sovereignty and violence. We (the editors) therefore published a call for papers with questions such as "What is the relationship between globalisation and war?"; "Has cosmopolitan thought facilitated military interventionism, rather than constrained it?"; and "Is there no longer a clear-cut distinction between police forces (inside) and the military (outside)?" The articles included in this issue provide an overview of the various views on these and many more questions related to our main topic, *Globalisation and War*. In addition to articles, polemics and book reviews, also included in this issue are two roundtable discussions. The first of these directly addresses the effects of globalisation on a particular form of political subjectivity and conflict, as it deals with the topic of *Transnational Militancy in the 21st Century*, with contributions from Saul Newman, Kevin McDonald and Faisal Devji (moderated by Nathan Coombs). The debate focuses in particular on how the contradictions within militant movements like al-Qaeda can function as a mirror for some of the larger paradoxes of the current global arena, especially with regards to universal values, globalism and, most importantly perhaps, the gap between experience and the categories we use to make sense of it. Our second discussion is entitled *Windows on Empire: Perspectives from History, Culture and Political Economy*, with Saskia Sassen, Leo Panitch, Sanjay Seth and Christian Marazzi. It is the transcript of a symposium held at the Birkbeck Institute of Humanities in November 2008, and was kindly provided to us by Alex Colás and Costas Douzinas. The discussion covers a broad range of topics related to imperialism, including the concept of empire, historical materialist methodology, the effects of economic integration and globalisation on war, and strategies for

contesting empire. It therefore gives an excellent overview of the various theoretical and political challenges posed by the rubric of empire and its significance in the context of contemporary issues of political hierarchy, military competition and socio-economic domination.

For the articles, James Brassett, investigates the notions of trauma and vulnerability in light of cosmopolitan responses to 9/11. His article emphasises how David Held's notion of 'communities of fate' is relevant for investigating whether there is today a 'global traumatic stress community,' and it addresses the larger question of how cosmopolitan sentiments play out differently in processes of global governance. The second article, from Nick Srnicek, looks at the global and the local in conflict assemblages. Creatively utilizing Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory Srnicek argues that our thinking about conflict needs to incorporate consideration of non-human actors and reject transcendent categories of explanation.

Our polemics section, which consists of shorter, engaged articles, starts with a contribution from Francis Shor, and describes the various imperial strategies utilized by the United States in its hegemonic policies. In his view, the conflicts that the world has seen in recent times are the result of a strategy that is aimed at maintaining American hegemony. However, the violence used to achieve this aim is paradoxical, since it produces increasingly fierce resistance to the United States and thus undermines its ultimate aim. For Shor, this raises the question whether the US will relinquish its 'foolish and lethal efforts' either through internal contradictions or through external antagonisms; a question that is all too important in today's unipolar world. Victoria Ridler, from a quite different perspective, looks at the questions of reason and critique through the thought of Francis Bacon. Ridler conducts an analysis of how Bacon's thought still maintains efficacy in "sustaining *imperium* at the heart of our attempts to think of justice in a global context."

Lastly, a number of books have been reviewed for this issue, all of which deal with topics that are relevant in the context of discussions on globalisation and war. Thus, the book reviews section contains discussions of Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss' *Humanitarianism in Question*, Darius Rejali's *Torture and Democracy*, *Humanitarian Imperialism* by Jean Bricmont, and Raymond Geuss' *Philosophy and Real Politics*. In addition, there is a short review essay on a number of publications related to 'the Stanford School' and its contributions to the study of conflict.

Altogether it is hoped that readers will find this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* a stimulating addition to the ongoing debates in globalisation studies, international relations and philosophy that have been concerned with the topics addressed. By bringing some of these different disciplines together we have aimed to further instigate critical debate and original thinking. Given the political events that have characterised the last 10 years, the new walls

and the new wars that have accompanied globalisation, this enterprise seems more urgent than ever.

Pepijn van Houwelingen (on behalf of all the editors)
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