

Risk and barbarism: Paradigms of postmodern warfare

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Abstract

Given the moral ambiguity of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, and the increase in smaller-scale nationalist conflicts within formerly imperial regions, it is not unreasonable for scholars to ask the question: why are “risk” and “barbarism” the paradigms of postmodern warfare? In addressing this question, this article primarily focuses on the arguments presented by [Coker](#) (2009) and [Hobsbawm](#) (1997). It will show that the tenets of postmodernism have fuelled a reflexive approach to international security, challenged accepted norms of national identity and undermined the values of the Enlightenment. By looking at conflicts in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Africa between 1989 and 2007, this paper will argue that both paradigms are interconnected and open to manipulation. Those international actors that best comprehend the paradigms of postmodern warfare, and specifically their ramifications, will attempt to manufacture possible futures that work in their favour, even at the risk of creating greater problems. This will ensure an anxiety-ridden status quo where morality will continue to play second fiddle to profit-driven efficiency.

Keywords

Risk society, barbarism, postmodern warfare, reflexivity, anxiety.

Introduction

The nature of warfare has changed considerably since the Cold War, when the rational development of weapons technology saw the world locked in a struggle for total victory between two incompatible ideologies of progress. With the fall of communism, the world has entered a new phase of postmodern warfare. The conventional approaches to conducting war are no longer adequate for the requirements of international relations. Issues raised by postmodern scholars, particularly the scepticism of metanarratives such as historical teleology, and the subsequent awareness of the potential for alternative possibilities, has compelled key actors, such as nation states, to reassess their identities and sense of purpose in terms of security issues ([Lyotard](#), 1984, pp. xxiii-xxiv). A new risk society paradigm, proposed by [Beck](#) (2006) and applied to warfare by Coker (2009), argues that the larger states are responding to the heightened anxiety generated by postmodernism, and the psychological fallout of four decades of mutually assured destruction, with reflexivity. All possible threats are assessed in advance and seemingly appropriate military resources are allocated, with potentially dire consequences. Another paradigm, that of barbarism, as proposed by Eric Hobsbawm, looks at the increased outbursts of violence within, and between, smaller states, that reflect changing issues of identity stemming from postmodern ideas. But in doing so he highlights a breakdown in the civilising values of the Enlightenment – the rational progress of humanity, and respect for liberty and equality. He argues that the changing attitudes towards, and of, nation states that are losing their legitimacy in the eyes of individuals, leads to the loss of the values on which civilisation has developed and is held together. By using examples of conflict in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Africa, I will define both paradigms in greater detail, discuss their interconnectedness, limitations, and the ramifications of their application. I will argue that these paradigms are not absolute

but they are perpetuating an ongoing pessimism that maintains an anxiety-prone status quo that most benefits the actors with a greater grasp of the concepts on which they are built.

Risk Society

Postmodern scholars, such as Jean-François Lyotard and Hayden White, have challenged the validity of metanarratives as being constructed by authority figures to justify the legitimacy of their own power. As Lyotard says, "In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimising the system's performance - efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear." (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Historically, this approach has not been limited to politicians. It extends, through social processes such as education and culture, to many groups of people, particularly in the Western world, that have desired superiority over others, be it imperialism and race, class warfare, and gender inequality. This raises questions about potential alternatives to grand narratives, not just in addressing historical teleologies, but how incumbent authority figures might respond to and address those alternatives in real time.

The concept of the risk society has been developed by German sociologist Ulrich Beck, and others such as Anthony Giddens, since the 1980s. It is argued that due to the Enlightenment and subsequent modernisation, in which the production of goods for benefit has created global "bads", the world is more susceptible to unknown risks. These risks, such as the implications of global warming or biochemical terrorism, are not geographically or temporally contained, but are global and infinite. The risk society is preoccupied with questions of how those risks can be "prevented, minimised, dramatised or channelled"

([Williams](#), 2008, p. 60). The awareness of the diversity of possible futures exacerbates the sense of anxiety generated by the potential for risk. This anxiety produces within state leaders a compulsion to act in an attempt to control the world, particularly those leaders who are elected and are therefore under pressure from media and popular opinion (Beck, 2006, p.329). The same rational methodology that was applied to looking to a once-certain past is now directed at an unknown future with the additional influences of “imagination, suspicion, fiction and fear” (Beck, 2006, p.335). This reflexivity is compounded by the fact that once potential risks are acted upon, those actions alter the diversity of possible outcomes (Beck, 2006, p. 332). In terms of warfare, the implications of risk society theory has been attributed to its postmodern guise.

Coker (2009) applies the premises of risk society to conflict in the Middle East since 1990. He argues that war has become an instrument of risk management. The diversity of possible futures, which shattered any illusion of closure, has generated a condition of ongoing ambivalence that at best can only be managed, but never controlled (Coker, 2009, p. 10). As former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld put it in 2002: “There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are unknowns; that is to say there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” ([Rumsfeld](#), 2002). Coker says, “The risk society puts a premium on anticipating events; scenario planning has become the norm” (2009, p. 2). He argues that it was the US’ failure to act on its own predictions in regards to Saddam Hussein that led to the first Gulf War (1990-1991). Rather than deter Hussein from invading Kuwait, they waited for it to happen then stepped in. Coker then suggests causality between the supposed failures of this conflict, 9/11 and the second Gulf War in 2003 (2009, p. 1).

Although the US achieved their aim of removing Hussein’s forces from Kuwait, Coker argues

there was a lack of closure because they did not take the opportunity to defeat him outright, which created greater risks in terms of terrorism that would eventually play out on an unprecedented scale in 2001. However, crushing Hussein in 1991 would have entailed breaching the United Nations mission in a unilateral act, to which the US was not ready to commit. Ironically, it would take the events of 9/11 to justify such unilateral action.

A clearer example of the reflexivity of the risk paradigm creating greater dangers with further-reaching consequences than were originally perceived is the environmental and economic damage inflicted by the Iraqis on their retreat when they set fire to Kuwait's oil fields (Coker, 2009, p. 9). The wilful destruction of finite natural resources and its impact on the global economy due to rising oil prices was an outcome the US government had not accounted for, one that completely contradicted their aims for strategic security in the region. More importantly, it would never have happened if the US had not tried to secure those interests in the first place.

Other "unknown unknowns" were famously used by the US as a justification for invading then occupying Iraq in 2003, that is, the perceived potential for terrorists to gain access to weapons of mass destruction following the horrific events of 9/11 (Beck, 2006, p. 335). The circumvention of causality, usually associated with political discourse, has become a feature of postmodern warfare (Williams, 2008, p. 62). This is a direct result of the risk paradigm, where the security challenges are presented by governments as multi-directional and multifaceted (Williams, 2008, p. 69). In this heightened state of anxiety, the political cost of not acting outweighs the costs of over-reaction (Beck, 2006, p. 335). The potential political fallout from the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was minimised by the creation of the Coalition of the Willing: the alliance of several liberal democratic states, including the United Kingdom and Australia, that were inspired to act by the Bush

administration, and united in their fear of rogue states using weapons of mass destruction. These states also adopted the tenets of the risk paradigm, thereby spreading the risks across a broader base, while enhancing a sense of moral authority.

That being said, the risk paradigm is not absolute. Coker has several critics who raise valid questions. David Chandler takes issue with what he believes is an apologia on the part of risk theorists for the retreat of government, or more specifically those liberal democratic governments that argue agency has shifted to the “unknown unknowns”. He also believes Coker has failed to consider the implications of transferring risk society ideas to warfare. In his view, there is no such thing as postmodern warfare, war has not changed. He claims that Coker is exaggerating the concern surrounding “unknown unknowns”, which exacerbates the subjective nature to the response rather than allowing an objective measure of the issues of war ([Chandler](#), 2010, pp. 292-293). It is difficult to support an argument that warfare hasn't changed in the past 100 years. Even broadly speaking, the shift from balance of power politics in Europe prior to 1914, to nuclear deterrence during the Cold War suggests otherwise. However, Chandler does raise an important issue – agency. Risk is a paradigm for postmodern warfare because the most powerful actors on the world stage, the neo-liberal leaders of the US hegemony – the administration of George W Bush – believed in it at a time when it could be adopted. They had the military resources, political backing and, most importantly, the historical contingency, courtesy of 9/11, to make it happen – in this respect it is a self-fulfilling prophesy.

The Bush administration justified its foreign policy post-9/11 by arguing that agency had shifted to the “unknown unknowns”, in order to belie its own desire for agency in enforcing regime change in the Middle East. By deflecting a sense of agency, and therefore responsibility, away from themselves, liberal democratic leaders were able to act in ways

that would otherwise be their political undoing. In her assessment of Coker's ideas, Aradau raises the key point that "while enmeshed in speculations about the future, the risk society appears to paradoxically lack a future that would radically change the status quo" (Aradau, [2010](#), p. 111). This is an apposite summary of neo-liberal goals – the ongoing compulsion to act on short notice within an environment that is freed from the constraints of traditional decision-making due to the enhanced sense of anxiety. The implications of this ongoing compulsion point towards the other paradigm of postmodern warfare, that of barbarism. When the most powerful state in the world rejects the moral principles on which nation states were founded, people understandably lose faith in the ability of government institutions to protect them. An analysis of this phenomenon demonstrates that both paradigms are conducive to the realpolitik ambitions of neo-liberals.

Barbarism

The British historian Eric Hobsbawm gives two definitions for barbarism: the breakdown of the system of rules and moral behaviour on which all societies rely for the regulation of relations; and more specifically, the reversal of the Enlightenment which established those systems of rules and which were embodied through institutions of the state dedicated to the rational progress of humanity. Similar to the risk paradigm, he argues that the breakdown and reversal reinforce one another's negative effects (Hobsbawm, 1997, pp. 253-254).

There are three separate forces driving and shaping the barbarism paradigm. Firstly, there is the desire to kill more efficiently in an effort to gain or maintain the monopoly of violence, which has evolved since the First World War. Secondly, the willingness to resort to violence by smaller groups when civil society breaks down. The third force is linked to the

first two and is also connected to the risk paradigm: the anxiety and mistrust generated by the postmodern realisation that the state institutions and key political actors are inadequate or are incapable of maintaining a civil society – the very thing that protects us from barbarism.

Hobsbawm shows how the rational pursuit of progress through technology led to disturbing precedents of state-instigated violence. He argues that the desire to kill more efficiently was a result of the totalising aspects of the First World War which shattered the concept of civilised warfare. The line between combatants and non-combatants was dissolved and has not returned since. The annihilation of the enemy became crucial to survival. Liberal democracies needed to demonise the enemy in order to convince voting citizens of the threat of total war. This demonisation continued through to the Second World War, but was much easier to employ in the face of fascism and communism. These ideologies fuelled similar developments in barbarity, such as the Holocaust. The totalising nature of warfare remained unchanged, but by 1947 the technology had advanced to the point of mutually assured destruction (Hobsbawm, 1997, pp. 256-257). As a result, the definition of efficiency in regards to killing needed to be reassessed. Quantity was no longer an appropriate measure as the results were unthinkable. Quality, in terms of strategic value, became a more suitable measure, but it required a wilful denial of the moral values of the Enlightenment in order to adopt it as government policy. This moral decline was not immediate but developed over decades.

A telling example of this moral decline can be found in Errol Morris' film *The Fog of War*. Even prior to the dropping of the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Robert McNamara had overseen the incendiary bombing of multiple Japanese cities during the Second World War. During this campaign more than 100,000 civilians were slaughtered in

the name of efficiency. He acknowledged that if the Allies had lost the war, they would have been charged as war criminals, but victory absolved them. This set a precedent on the part of liberal democracies of questionable moral behaviour ([Morris](#), 2003). Since the 1970s, with the radicalisation of politics, new precedents of violent behaviour were being set by non-state actors (revolutionaries, terrorists etc), methods which nation states have been more than willing to adopt in order to regain the monopoly of violence, such as torture and the “disappearing” of opponents in Latin American countries (Hobsbawm, 1997, p. 261). The institutions of civilisation, although publically championing the importance of liberty and self-determination, were no longer underpinned by the moral values of the Enlightenment ([Ferguson](#), 2007, p.615).

The second force driving and shaping the barbarism paradigm involves the smaller conflicts that erupt when civil society breaks down. The nationalist conflicts and civil wars of the 1990s in the Balkans and Central Africa are evidence of this. Hobsbawm argues it was a response to a double collapse – of the political order as represented by functioning states and the old frameworks of social relations (Hobsbawm, 1997, p. 264). Niall Ferguson, who also goes into great detail in *The War of the World* to map the barbarity of the 20th century, argues that there are other factors requisite for such violence, such as “ethnic confluence, economic volatility and empires on the wane” (Ferguson, 2007, p.645), which suggests a slightly less pessimistic viewpoint based on causality, rather than an ongoing condition of postmodernism.

Both are valid arguments. The combatants in these smaller conflicts also employed different forms of barbarity, which are no less destructive than the effects of technological development in the hands of leading liberal democracies and dictatorships. Civilian militias and ethnic groups fighting in the name of nationalism, who lack funds or organisational

capacity, use mass executions and systemic rape to weaken their adversaries. Miriam Cooke provides ample evidence of rape as a weapon of war dating back to the 1930s (the Japanese in China; Nazis against Russians and Jews, and Soviets against Germans during the Second World War; and Americans against North Vietnamese women in the 1960s and '70s), but in the postmodern world it is being inflicted by uncontrollable groups, such as ethnic militia in the Congo ([Cooke](#), 1996, p. 37). Ferguson suggests that the ambivalent nature of hatred – the combination of eros and thanatos (sexuality and morbidity), which exists within all humans, is repressed within a civil society, and when that breaks down, those urges are unleashed (Ferguson, 2007, pp. 634-635). It is a point that talks clearly to Hobsbawm's definition of barbarism, but Cooke sensibly points out that it is the gendered nature of warfare that enables this paradigm (Cooke, 1996, p. 38).

Another crucial element of these smaller conflicts that defines the paradigm of barbarity in postmodern warfare is the issue of identity. Susan Suleiman looks to the tenets of postmodernism in an attempt to understand the violence in Bosnia. Without the universal truths relied upon during modernity, issues of national identity have become more complex, fragile and incendiary ([Suleiman](#), 1997, p. 56). She argues that the politics of identity caused the fighting in Bosnia, but her concept of postmodern subjectivity could not play out if there were legitimate civil structures in place to prevent the violence, which suggests Hobsbawm's approach provides a framework in which to place Suleiman's ideas.

The third driving force for the barbarism paradigm incorporates elements of the risk paradigm – it is the anxiety and mistrust generated by the postmodern realisation that civil institutions and political actors are incapable of protecting people from the potential for barbarity. This is complicated further by the fact that some liberal democracies, within the risk paradigm, are guilty of intentionally increasing that potential. The clearest examples of

this is the neo-liberal push for regime change in those regions of strategic value to the US. According to Naomi Klein (2007), this can be charted from the Chicago School of the 1970s, which encouraged the use of torture and covert operations to strengthen geopolitical positions for capitalist gain in Latin America, through to the use of renditions in response to 9/11, and the invasion and occupation of Iraq (Klein, 2007, p. 330). She argues that the Iraq War was orchestrated by neo-liberals to create new markets for US-driven multinational firms. She points out that the key political actors, such as Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Bremer, were involved with the state-instigated but covert violence in Chile in the 1970s, and were applying a similar model of overwhelming a targeted regime then installing a model corporatist state for their own benefit (2007, p. 331). Their links to multinational military and security firms are well documented by [Scahill](#) (2007). This ongoing privatisation of war is an element of both the risk paradigm and the barbarism paradigm. Multinational firms such as Lockheed, BAE and General Electric have been developing the technology for national security as well as framing the questions that shape foreign policy for some time ([Weiner](#), 2004). Security firms, such as Blackwater, employed former soldiers of brutal regimes to work as mercenaries in Iraq. Attempts to prosecute these soldiers for civilian casualties has highlighted the legal grey zone in which they work. They are not answerable to the US legal system but neither are they answerable to Iraq. It is this blatant subversion of the nation state that undermines the legitimacy of civil institutions, which exemplifies the barbarism paradigm (Scahill, 2007, pp. xx-xxi). It is the commercial intentions and military capacity of multinational firms to influence foreign policy that makes it central to the risk society paradigm, especially in Iraq since 2003.

Conclusion

In the absence of a well-known rival superpower, and mired in the complexities of postmodern ideas that reject metanarratives and embrace the diversity of possible alternative futures, it is little wonder that a liberal democracy like the US would question its identity in terms of security issues and be somewhat alarmed by potential threats to its ongoing hegemony. The rise of the risk society paradigm generated a plethora of perceived possible threats and as many contingency plans from which a proactive foreign policy could be pursued, while the anxiety that the paradigm created served as the fuel to immediate action. Anxiety, like a virus, spread through most liberal democracies following 9/11. Given the gradual moral decline over many decades by governments who had set disturbing precedents in decision-making, it is also little wonder that a paradigm of barbarism would shape postmodern warfare. This also comprised recent outbreaks of nationalist conflicts and civil wars within smaller states on the borders of waning or past empires, sparked by complex subjective issues of identity, where the civil institutions that were designed to protect citizens from barbarity were incapable of doing so. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of postmodern warfare is the way the two paradigms are interconnected and open to manipulation, as illustrated by the neo-liberal push for regime change in strategic states and the rapid privatisation of war. Those international actors that best comprehend the paradigms of postmodern warfare, and specifically their ramifications, will continue to attempt to manufacture possible futures that work in their favour, even at the risk of creating greater problems. This will ensure an anxiety-ridden status quo where morality will continue to play second fiddle to profit-driven efficiency.

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