Introduction: war, violence and the social

The human relationship with violence and war is complex and paradoxical. On the one hand there is near universal condemnation of violent acts, which is reflected in the strong normative prohibitions against the physical harm of fellow humans and, as such, is underpinned by legal systems all around the world. On the other hand, our popular culture, novels, history textbooks, mass media, art, games, children's toys and many other everyday outlets are saturated with images and instruments of violence. Although no sound person would openly advocate organised killing of other human beings, there is a palpable and widespread fascination and even obsession with violence and warfare. Just skimming the popular bestsellers of the last several decades it becomes obvious that there is an almost inexhaustible hunger for books, documentaries and motion picture portrayals of violent movements and warmongering individuals.[1] Whereas it seems there can never be enough books and films on Hitler and the Nazis, the works and deeds of Gandhi and Mother Theresa draw very modest audiences. While peace and brotherly love might be the proclaimed ideals, it is war and violence that attract popular attention and fascination.

All of this could suggest that a human being is a hypocritical creature and that below the surface of civilised manners and altruistic ethics lays a dormant beast that awaits the first opportunity to inflict injury on its fellow humans. Such a view, in one or another form, has dominated much of social and political thought from the early works of Machiavelli and Hobbes to the contemporary realist and the neo-Darwinian interpretations of 'human nature'. In Machiavelli's (1997 [1532]: 65) own words: 'it may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful and fickle, dissemblers, avoiders of danger, and greedy of gain'. In a similar way, for Hobbes (1998 [1651]) our original 'state of nature' was characterised by endemic violence involving ferocious

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[1] For example Gardner and Resnick's research (1996) on the 2,000 programmes broadcasted on the major US television networks between 1973 and 1993 shows that over 60 per cent featured violent action and more than 50 per cent of the programmes' leading characters were involved in violence.

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struggle over gain, security and reputation – 'a war of every man against every man'.

This highly popular understanding of the human relationship to violence and war is countered by an alternative and also influential view that goes all the way back to Rousseau, Kant and Paine and is currently echoed in much of the literature that dominates such fields as conflict resolution and peace studies. This perspective starts from the proposition that human beings are essentially peaceful, reasoned, compassionate and cooperative creatures who become violent under the influence of 'social ills' such as private property, class divisions, institutionalised greed or something else. As Rousseau (2004 [1755]: 27) puts it: 'The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "this is mine", and found people naive enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody'.

These two sharply contrasting perspectives assume that either we inhabit an egoistic universe of insecurity and violence where, as Hobbes puts it, like wolves, each man preys on those around him, or that our natural state is one of a harmonious communal life characterised by intense solidarity, altruism and peace. From the first perspective, society is the external guarantor of order that pacifies the beast within us all; from the second, modern society is responsible for corrupting the essential goodness of human nature.

Although these two contrasting standpoints have commanded much attention for the past three centuries, neither provides a sociologically accurate account of the human relationship to war and violence. Rather than being an inherent biological or psychological reflex for self-preservation or an expedient instrument for individual gain, much of human violence is profoundly social in character. Being social does not automatically imply an innate propensity towards harmony and peace. On the contrary, it is our sociality, not individuality, which makes us both compassionate altruists and enthusiastic killers. The recent empirical research (Holmes 1985; Grossman 1996; Bourke 2000; Collins 2008) shows clearly that as individuals we are not particularly good at violent action, and in contrast to the popular representation, a great deal of violent individual behaviour is characterised by incompetence, messiness and is of very short duration (see Chapter 8). As Collins (2008: 14) demonstrates, the majority of serious fights involving small groups are no more than quick blusters and one-punch affairs: 'the actual gunfight at the

O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona, in 1881 took less than thirty seconds' while 'the movie version took seven minutes'. In real life, rather than enjoying actual violence, human beings tend to avoid violent confrontations. In contrast to Machiavelli's and Hobbes's diagnosis, a solitary individual is unlikely to fight: when alone and weak we avoid violent altercations, we run away. The war of all against all is an empirical impossibility: as any successful violent action entails organisation and as organised action requires collective coordination, hierarchy and the delegation of tasks, all warfare is inevitably a social event.

Hence, violence is neither a result of innate aggressiveness nor of externally induced 'social ills' but is something that requires intensive social action. As human beings we are capable of, and prone to, both selfishness and solidarity. The key paradox of the Machiavelli/Hobbes vs. Rousseau/Kant debate is that since both perspectives lack the sociological eye, they misdiagnose social reality: the point is that when we act in the image of Hobbes's state of nature – as egoistic self-preservers – we do that for very Rousseauian reasons and nearly always in Rousseauian contexts. As we need others to kill so we also need others for whom to sacrifice ourselves. Our social embeddedness is the source of both our selfishness and our altruism. We fight and slaughter best when in the presence of others – to impress, to please, to conform, to hide fear, to profit, to avoid shame and for many other reasons too. And it is these very same social ties that make us equally and often simultaneously martyrs and murderers. Historical experience indicates that life becomes 'poor, nasty, brutish and short' not when we are 'solitary' but when, and because, we live in groups.

The fact that much of our relationship with violence and war is determined by our social character suggests that to understand warfare and violence we need to understand the social. In other words, without comprehensive sociological analysis there cannot be a proper explanation of violence and war. Unfortunately, it seems that a great deal of contemporary scholarship does not share this view as neither the conventional studies of war and collective violence engage significantly with sociology nor does a contemporary mainstream sociology devote much attention to the study of war and organised violence (Shaw 1984; Joas 2003; Wimmer and Min 2006). The main aim of this book is to demonstrate the intrinsic indispensability of using sociological tools to gain a full understanding of the changing character of war and violence. In particular, the book focuses on the historical and contemporary impact of coercion and warfare on the transformation of social life and vice versa. Although collective violence and war have shaped much of recorded

human history and were decisive components in the formation of the modern social order, most contemporary analyses tend to shy away from the sociological study of the gory origins and nature of social life. However, whether we like it or not, violence is one of the central constituents of human subjectivity, and modern subjectivity in particular, since modernity as we know it would be unthinkable without organised violence.

This is not to say that human beings as such are either prone to or like violence. On the contrary it is precisely because we share a normative abhorrence towards violent behaviour, are generally – as individuals – feeble executioners of violent acts and much of our daily life is free of violence, that we find wars and killing so fascinating. They are fascinating because, from the everyday standpoint, they are rare, difficult and strange. Our obsession is rooted in our fear and awe of something that is not common, usual and regular but extraordinary and, as such, in some respects incomprehensible. Since inflicting harm on other humans goes so much against the grain of our socialisation and is not something we ordinarily see or participate in, it becomes enthralling. Rather than being a sign of our 'essentially violent nature', the human fascination with violence and war is a good indicator that these phenomena are odd, unusual and atypical. We are curious about something we do not know and rarely, if ever, experience, not with something that is ordinary and ever present. Violence attracts our attention precisely because we are not good at it and do not encounter it on a daily basis. As Moscovici (1986: 157) sardonically remarks, the image of the devil 'is so useful and so powerful precisely because you do not meet him in the street'.

However if human beings are for the most part wary of violence and bad at being violent, why is warfare so prevalent in human history and, particularly, why has it so dramatically increased in the modern age?

In an attempt to answer this question this book focuses on the role of social organisation and ideology in fostering social conditions for the mass participation of individuals in large-scale violent acts and especially in warfare. The central argument is that, although as individuals we are neither very willing nor very capable of using violence, social organisations and the process of ideologisation can and often do aid our transformation into fervent and adept killing machines. The key point is that any long-lasting collective violence, particularly large-scale conflicts such as warfare, entails two vital ingredients: a complex, structural, organisational capacity and a potent legitimising ideology. As violence does not come naturally and automatically to humans, its successful application on a mass scale, such as warfare, requires highly developed organisational mechanisms of social control and

well articulated and institutionally embedded ideological doctrines capable of justifying such action. As Collins (2008: 11) puts it adeptly: 'if it were not socially well organised, wide-participation fighting would not be possible'. Instead of interpreting war and other forms of organised violence in biological, cultural, individualist or collective rationalist terms the focus shifts towards the role of organisation and ideology. More specifically, I analyse the relationship between war, violence and the social through the prism of two historical processes which I see as paramount in accounting for the dramatic rise of organised violence in modernity: the cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion and the centrifugal (mass) ideologisation.

The cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion

Max Weber (1968) provided the most potent diagnosis of modernity by emphasising the almost inescapable iron cage of rationality that gradually permeates and routinises everyday social life. The ever increasing transformation from traditional forms of social action towards those governed by instrumental and value rationality creates a social environment whereby personal ties and nepotistic relationships become slowly but steadily replaced with impersonal rules and bureaucratic regulations. Unlike traditional authority, where a leader's domination was essentially an inherited personal right, bureaucratic organisation operates through a consistent system of abstract laws. Although both the traditional and the bureaucratic forms of organisation are rigorously hierarchical, unlike its ad hoc and clientelist traditional counterpart, the typical bureaucratic administration is built around principles that insist on the rule-governed, meritocratic and transparent model of hierarchical domination. The key feature of the bureaucratic model of administration lies in its privileging of knowledge (i.e. epistemic authority) which, according to Weber, makes this form of social action much more effective and productive than any of its historical predecessors. In other words, the phenomenal historical success of the bureaucratic mode of social organisation owes a great deal to its instrumental efficiency.

Although Weber's analysis of bureaucratic rationalisation has become a staple of mainstream contemporary sociology, most analysts neglect two crucial facts. Firstly, although much social theory focuses on the economic or cultural characteristics and consequences of bureaucratic rationalisation (e.g. Lash and Urry 1987; Sklair 1991; 2002), and in particular the relationship between the bureaucracy and capitalism, the principle realm of

bureaucratisation, the realm where it originated, is the military. As Weber (1968: 1152) emphasises, the central component of bureaucratic rationality is discipline and 'military discipline gives birth to all discipline' (see Chapter 1). Hence, to deal adequately with the process of bureaucratisation it is necessary to shift our attention towards the role of the organisation of coercion.

Secondly, the birth and expansion of the bureaucratic model of rational organisation has historically been wedded to institutions that were able to monopolise the use of violence. That is, there is no effective use or threat to use violence without developed social organisation. Historically speaking, it was warfare that gave birth to, and consequently depended on the existence of, large-scale social organisations (see Chapter 9). Despite popular perceptions that see the modern world as less violent than its historical precursors and bureaucratic rationalisation as something that prevents coercive action, all bureaucratisation is deeply rooted in coercive control. Since bureaucratic domination rests on the inculcation and control of discipline and remains dependent on disciplined action, it requires and demands obedience. In this sense a factory worker, a civil servant, a teacher or a nurse are, in a general sense, governed by the very same principles of bureaucratic organisation as soldiers and the police. This implies not only clearly defined hierarchies, the division of labour and meritocratic social mobility, but also the regular and regulated execution of commands, strict compliance with the rules of the respective organisation and loyalty to the organisation. Moreover, all of these organisational demands are underpinned by the legal codes that stipulate penalties for noncompliance. In other words, the organisational principles which govern most of our lives are profoundly coercive in character which is not surprising since they originated in the military sphere.

However, what is important to emphasise is that this process of bureaucratisation which in its rudimentary form emerged with the birth of warfare in the late Mesolithic era has been constantly expanding since. The coercive power of social organisations, most recently taking the dominant form of nation-states, has increased over the last 10,000 years and has dramatically intensified over that last 200 years (see Chapters 3 and 4). Not only have the modern social organisations, such as states, managed to monopolise the use of violence over huge stretches of their territory thus eventually covering most of the globe, but they have also gradually become capable of mobilising and recruiting entire societies for warfare and have spectacularly multiplied the numbers of those killed in conflicts. Whereas in the pre-modern world of the nascent bureaucratisation of coercion, killing was limited in scope, the

modern bureaucratic machines are able to act swiftly and murder millions in a matter of months if not days. As Eckhardt (1992: 272) shows, while at the beginning of the high Middle Ages the casualties of all wars throughout the known world had amounted to a mere 60,000; the twentieth century alone was responsible for more than 110 million deaths caused directly by warfare. Hence, despite contextual contingencies, time-specific reversals and historical ups and downs the bureaucratisation of coercion is a cumulative historical process: it continues to increase over time as does the destructive power of social organisations. In other words, as human populations increase, develop and expand there is a greater demand for the multiplicity of services, material and symbolic goods that only large-scale social organisations can provide on a regular basis. However, as human beings grow ever more dependent on the social organisations, the organisations themselves become more powerful and continue to increase their coercive reach and depth. This is most evident in the gradual transformation of warfare which initially was limited to a narrow circle of aristocrats engaging in quasi-ritualistic skirmishes with a few casualties, and eventually became a total event involving millions of mobilised and ideologised citizens bent on the destruction of entire societies deemed to be enemies.

It is true that social organisations are not superhuman and omnipotent things that entirely determine human behaviour but are processual and dynamic entities created by and reliant on continuous human action. Nevertheless, it is precisely these dynamic, historical contingencies that have ultimately created the situation wherein human beings require, and in some ways feel comfortable with, the prevalence of social organisations around them. The cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion is a historical process that for the most part does not go against the grain of the popular doxa: although it is essentially a coercive mechanism it is not something superimposed on individuals against their will. Instead, it is a process that entails tacit and sustained support at all levels of society. It is a product of long-term human action and, as such, is much more overbearing precisely because it necessitates, and grows on, continuous ideological legitimation. To sum up, the bureaucratisation of coercion is cumulative because it is an ongoing historical process that involves the constant increase of organisational capability for destruction; it is bureaucratic since it entails ever-expanding bureaucratic rationalisation in the Weberian sense, which originated in the military sphere; and it is coercive since it involves not only the control and employment of violence and the waging of wars but it is also

able to internally pacify social order by establishing the monopolistic threat on the use of violence.

Centrifugal ideologisation

Since human beings as individuals are circumspect of, and incompetent at, violence, successful warfare entails the existence of elaborate social organisations. It is the internal disciplinary effects of social organisations that make soldiers fight by inhibiting them from escaping the battlefields and it is social organisation that transforms chaotic and incoherent micro-level violence into an organised machine of macro-level destruction. However, no social organisation would be able to succeed in the long term if its actions were not popularly understood as just. This is particularly relevant for organisations that utilise violence since violent action per se is nearly universally perceived as an illegitimate form of social conduct. Hence, the cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion often goes hand in hand with the legitimizing ideology.

Since ideology is one of the most deeply contested concepts in social science, it is essential to make clear from the outset what is meant by this term. Traditionally, ideology was conceived as a rigid, closed system of ideas that governs social and political action.[2] Typically, individuals were deemed to be ideological if they expressed unquestioned loyalty to the principles set out in the doctrine they adhered to, or if they followed a particular ideological blueprint so that they acted contrary to their own self-interests. Representative examples of such rigid systems of thought include followers of closed religious sects or radical political organisations. Recent studies have questioned such understandings of ideology by emphasising the flexibility and plasticity of ideological beliefs and practices, as well as the indispensability of ideology for making sense of one's social and political reality. In a number of highly influential works Michael Billig (1988, 1995, 2002) has demonstrated that the popular reception of ideological messages is always unsystematic and riddled with contradictions. Beliefs are often anchored in shared categories and concepts of recognisable ideological traditions, and are commonly perceived not as ideological but as obvious, normal and natural, and yet these categories of thought are rarely, if ever, treated as monolithic systems of meaning. Rather, popular beliefs and practices are filled with 'ideological dilemmas'

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[2] For an extensive critique of the Marxist, functionalist and post-structuralist approaches to ideology see Malešević 2002; 2006.

that originate in the social environment, where there are always competing hierarchies of power. Hence, when ideology confronts the complexities and contingencies of everyday life, human beings find themselves in ongoing 'contradictions of common sense'. Michael Freeden (1996, 2003) emphasises the cognitive necessity of ideological belief and practice, in addition to its flexibility. In his view, ideology maps one's social and political world. Social facts and political events never speak for themselves and thus require a process of decoding, and it is the use of a particular ideological map that helps one understand and contextualise these facts and events. Ideology imposes coherence and provides structure to contingent actions, events and images so that the ideological narrative assists in creating socially comprehensible meaning. Hence, ideology is best conceptualised as a relatively universal and complex social process through which human actors articulate their actions and beliefs. It is a form of 'thought-action' that infuses, but does not necessarily determine, everyday social practice. Since much of the ideological content projects transcendent grand vistas of the particular (imagined) social order, it surpasses experience and as such evades testability. Most ideological discourses invoke superior knowledge claims, advanced ethical norms and collective interests, and often rely on popular affects with a view of justifying actual or potential social action. Ideology is a complex process whereby ideas and practices come together in the course of legitimising or contesting power relations (Malešević 2002; 2006).

Although some form of proto-ideological power has been around since the emergence of warfare and other forms of organised violence, the modern age is the true cradle of fully fledged ideologies and the ongoing processes of centrifugal ideologisation (see Chapters 3, 4 and 6). Whereas traditional rulers made extensive use of the legitimising potency of proto-ideologies, such as religion and mythology, to justify conquests and coercive forms of governance, it is really modernity that requires and provides a really elaborate and full justification of violent action. There are many reasons why this is so but three points stand out. Firstly, the unprecedented structural and organisational transformation of social orders brought about by modernity have, as Nairn (1977) aptly puts it, invited ordinary people into history. In other words, the bureaucratic organisation of modern states, the spread of secular, democratic and liberal ideas, the dramatic increase in levels of literacy, the expansion of cheap and affordable publishing and the press, the extension of the military draft and the gradual development of the public sphere, among others, have all fostered the emergence of a new, much more politicised citizenry. Whereas the medieval peasantry generally had neither any

interest in, nor the possibility of, politically engaging in the working of the polities they inhabited, the people of the early modern world were not only receptive to new political interpretations of their reality but were also able and willing to take an active part in these political processes. Hence from then on, centrifugal (mass) ideologisation proliferates: ideologies become central for large sections of the population, meeting the popular demand to articulate the parameters of a desirable social order.

Secondly, the gradual dissemination of the Enlightenment (and later the Romanticist and other) principles that posit human reason, autonomy, toleration and peace as the central values of modernity, make the use of violence in this era less legitimate than in any previous period. What started off in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the eccentric ideas of a handful of intellectuals became universal rules safeguarded in the constitutions of nearly all modern states: rights to life, liberty, equality before the law, the preservation of peace and the prohibition of 'cruel and unusual punishment' (see Chapter 4). In principle, the modern age, like no other, has little tolerance for the use of violence against other human beings. Torture and public hangings are now popularly perceived as barbaric practices that have no place in the modern world.

Thirdly, as this historical period also saw an unprecedented expansion of mass scale violence, there was an organisational and popular demand to find a reconciliation between this violent reality and the profoundly anti-violent normative universe of the era. Since more people were killed in the twentieth century alone than in the rest of human history combined, during that century it became imperative to resolve the ontological dissonance created by the discrepancy between the reality and the stated ideals. Thus, ideology took and still takes central stage in this process of interpreting and justifying something that seems so absurd and irreconcilable. In this way, ideology becomes a cornerstone of everyday life not just for the main perpetuators of violence, such as the social organisations and their leaders, but also for the ordinary citizens who all wish to feel comfortable that their struggle has a just cause and the use of violence against the monstrous enemy is nothing more than a necessary evil (see Chapter 7).

Furthermore, as social organisations in modernity become ever larger they require and use ideological glue to tie the diverse citizenry into quasi-homogenous entities able and willing to support war and other coercive causes when necessary. To achieve this, the rulers utilise the process of ideologisation with the intention of projecting the genuine bonds of micro-level solidarity onto the ideological mass terrain of large-scale nation-states