

HOBBES TO THE PRESENT

# WAR IN SOCIAL THOUGHT



Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl

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Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl

*translated by Alex Skinner*



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## War in Social Thought



## PREFACE

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IN 2009 WE PUBLISHED a book called *Social Theory*, which attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of developments in sociological theory and adjacent fields in the German-, English-, and French-speaking worlds since the Second World War. Our latest joint effort is another book of theory and history of thought. This book goes much further back in history but has a narrower thematic focus. We are concerned here with the history of social theorizing on war and peace. The period in question extends from the early modern revolution in thinking about political issues in the work of Thomas Hobbes to the immediate present. There was of course an extensive philosophical, theological, and historiographical discourse on war and peace before Hobbes. By beginning with Hobbes, however, we are following a well-founded convention common within philosophy and the social sciences, one evident in the work of authors from Leo Strauss to Talcott Parsons. Our account revolves around the development of sociological theory, though supplemented by consideration of those thinkers whose writings—whatever their specific disciplinary affiliation—have exercised and continue to exercise a great influence on the development of sociology and the social sciences. We have not been concerned to achieve encyclopedic completeness, but we have tried to write a coherent narrative presenting a history of theory rather than the history of a discipline.

The key justification for our project is that, particularly when it comes to the topic of war and peace, we can fully comprehend and evaluate arguments only in their historical contexts. A historical account enables us to observe current assumptions and conclusions, as it were, *in statu nascenti*. We are not advocating a historical reductionism here, as if every contemporary idea were merely a lingering echo of classical thinking. But the practice of analyzing arguments in context helps us take a step back and gain perspective when thinking about the present.

We decided to organize the mass of relevant material on an essentially chronological basis. One alternative would have been to structure our account around paradigms, whether still emerging or with a lengthy

tradition often extending over vast stretches of time (such as “power-political realism”). We decided against this because it would have forced us to indulge in numerous schematizations and repetitions; it is seldom possible to confine the most interesting thinkers within the clear-cut boundaries of “paradigms.”

Like our previous joint effort, this book too is based partly on academic courses;<sup>1</sup> in this case, political motifs play a greater role. But we should mention that the origins of this book project also lie in a plan partially pursued but eventually abandoned. Years ago we made the decision to write a better and more comprehensive version of Günther Wachtler’s (1983) commendable but diminutive volume with its brief excerpts from important social scientific analyses of the armed forces. The introduction to this planned volume grew exponentially, far beyond our original intentions; we now present it, in expanded form, as a publication in its own right. Both authors have already published various texts on parts of this history. We have taken the liberty of drawing on our earlier work for some of the passages in this new book. This applies especially to passages from Hans Joas’s book *War and Modernity* (2003), though there the history of theory was just one motif among others and the focus was on the relationship between the experiences that constitute values and experiences of violence; it applies also to the introduction by Wolfgang Knöbl and Gunnar Schmidt to their jointly edited volume *Die Gegenwart des Krieges* (2000, *The Presence of War*) and the essay by Wolfgang Knöbl on the paradoxes of markets in violence: “Krieg als Geschäft” (2006b, *War as Business*).

We have sought to highlight one *leitmotiv* of our history of the relationship between social thought and war by using a term not used before as far as we know, namely the “suppression of war.” This choice of term is rooted in the observation that throughout the period examined here—from Hobbes to Habermas as it were—wars are often constitutive of theory construction, as the informative background to ideas, yet they do not appear in theories themselves at all or only to a small extent. This at least raises the suspicion that there is a mechanism at work here of the kind described by Sigmund Freud. According to him, frightening and threatening experiences perceived as negative are the very ones the conscious mind is likely to shut out—without robbing them of their potency. As our account shows, wars and periods of escalating tensions are often times of intensive interpretive production, featuring a highly positive mythologization of “us” in contrast to an equally negative mythologization of “them.” Once hostilities have abated, these interpretations are often

discarded or denied with much shame. This may apply to the relevant thinkers and scholars themselves or to their successors and admirers. In any case, wars represent a special affective challenge to our thinking, to which people often react with strategies of avoidance or mythologization or with historical self-consolation, as when a particular war is interpreted as the last that will be waged before the rise of a peaceful world.

But it would be a misunderstanding of our choice of terminology to imagine that we wish to psychoanalyze theory production. We are neither qualified nor motivated to do so. We will not be tracing the consequences of the suppression of war in the work of those authors in which it is most strikingly evident. Our focus is on the thematization of war, whatever marginal or distorted forms this may take. In-depth exploration of how social theory has approached the topic of war over the centuries can and should contribute to overcoming the “suppression of war” and to making the contemporary social sciences more realistic in this regard.

This book, originally published in German in 2008, has been slightly revised and expanded for the English-language edition. The Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS, School of History), at which both authors are presently fellows, has offered excellent working conditions that have made it easy for us to complete that work.

HANS JOAS

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*Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany*

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## Introduction

IF WE SURVEY post-1945 sociology, which has claimed for itself chief if not sole responsibility for the field of social theory, it is striking how little it has been influenced by violence and war. This pattern applies both to the recent violent past, in other words the era of world wars and state-organized mass murder that ended in 1945, and to the dangers of the contemporary era, by which we mean both the tensions between the two superpowers during the Cold War and the unstable international situation of the early twenty-first century. Neighboring subjects or analytical approaches, such as the theory of international relations or interdisciplinary conflict and peace studies, have produced important studies on states' capacity for peace and the stability of the global power system (Galtung 1996; Senghaas 2001). But these studies had very little impact on the overall development of social theory. A truly in-depth engagement with the problems of war or the threat of war that might have driven theoretical developments is absent both from the oeuvre of Talcott Parsons, the most influential sociologist during the first few decades after the Second World War, and from the grand theories of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Authors such as Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann in Germany and Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Touraine in France all produced a more or less systematic theory of society without seriously examining the problem of war and associated phenomena. This absence is all the more remarkable given that war undoubtedly played a formative role in their biographies. There are exceptions. In early postwar sociology, the key figure here is Raymond Aron and later, above all, Anthony Giddens (1985), who produced a comprehensive social theory at around the same time as the previously mentioned French and German authors, in which historical analyses of war and collective violence played a major role. But Giddens quite abruptly lost sight of this topic in the early 1990s. Surprisingly, then, the vast majority of past and present theorists—even if they attempted to produce a systematic interpretation of “modernity”—have almost always sidestepped the phenomenon of war, either completely or to a great ex-

tent. All too often, if they show any interest at all in historical analyses rather than restricting themselves to snapshots of society or cursory diagnoses of the contemporary world, they approach the history of the past few centuries as a more or less linear process of differentiation and rationalization, as if social change had always been a matter of peaceful if not harmonious progress, as if modernity hadn't been characterized by repeated phases of large-scale violence between states (see Knöbl/Schmidt 2000).

In brief, most contemporary social theory has failed to adequately express the internal contradictions, the Janus face, of the modern era. A substantial number of social scientists are still caught up in the peaceful-utopian mood of the European Enlightenment and continue to dream the "dream of a non-violent modernity" (Joas 2003). From this perspective, it is easy to dismiss wars as extreme exceptions, as temporary disturbances in the civilizational equilibrium. What are the reasons for this blindness of contemporary sociology and, above all, social theory with regard to war or—more generally—to violence?

It is no doubt significant in this context that violence, whether within societies or between states, has *never* been a central topic within the discipline. Certainly, the founders and classical figures of sociology referred to the causes, course, and impact of wars, class struggles, or other violent conflicts in their commentaries on current affairs and historical surveys—but the relationship between these commentaries and the systematic core of their theories is mostly quite unclear. They always paid far more attention to economic, social, and political inequality than to the phenomena of violence in general and war in particular. Even the legitimate institutions of the state monopoly on violence (police and armed forces) received fairly scant attention, which is remarkable in view of their size and significance in the age of the greatest rivalry between nation-states and massive social conflicts on the cusp of the twentieth century. It is this past lack of interest that has resulted in the theoretical problems of the present. While criminology and the sociology of deviant behavior have become established research fields, with notable findings on *individual* violence, far too little attention continues to be paid to the genesis and forms of *collective* and *state* violence (of whatever kind), and thus we find the greatest theoretical shortcomings here as well. Analyses of collective violence are often plagued by the misleading application of models presenting the genesis of individual violence and tend to fluctuate between rationalistic and irrationalistic overstatement. Whereas some authors attempt

to understand violence as an instrument coolly selected and deployed to further the interests of a nation or class, a phenomenon about which we can say little beyond noting its instrumentality, others view violence solely as the collapse of all social order, the consequence of a loss of normative orientation and individual rationality (for an excellent survey, see Pettenkofer 2010). Dramatic public events such as the racial unrest in the United States during the 1960s did lead to a temporary increase in scholarly interest and to solid reports by expert commissions; and it is true that recently some authors (mostly from the field of historical sociology) have produced theoretically ambitious studies of the genocidal violence that has proliferated since the 1990s (see, e.g., Mann 2005). Yet just as the public, and social scientists, quickly lost interest in the commissions' findings in the past, even a broad social theoretical interest in genocidal violence or the so-called New Wars is likely to tail off again rapidly as soon as other phenomena become the flavor of the month. The deeply anchored relevance structures of sociology have tended to obstruct engagement with the topic of collective violence and will likely continue to do so in future.

There are good reasons to believe that this peculiar apportioning of attention is due to the Western social sciences' attachment to the worldview of liberalism. There is of course no such thing as liberalism in the singular; we would probably be best advised to refer to a family of "liberalisms." Nonetheless it is fair to say that in this worldview violent internal conflicts and especially wars inevitably appeared as relics of an era nearing its end, an era not yet illuminated by the Enlightenment (Williams 2006). Early liberalism regarded contemporary wars as a consequence of the aristocrats' martial spirit or despots' mood swings, and even the First World War was perceived by American liberal intellectuals of the day as a sign of European backwardness in comparison with American modernity. The martial spirit of the aristocracy, and despotism, were themselves considered remnants of primitive developmental stages of humanity; civilized life should also be a civil life in which martial characteristics and needs are not merely prohibited by religion and morality, but genuinely toned down and alleviated, or redirected into sporting and economic competition ("le doux commerce"). Although this might not quite amount to an age of nonviolence, enlightened liberals at least seemed to discern the path ahead and the steps that must be taken in order to achieve a perfectly rational order. Just as torture, including its publicly celebrated forms, must be eliminated from the field of criminal justice, so

must war and all forms of violence against individuals and things vanish from modern—in other words, bourgeois—society. In the modernization theory of the period after 1945, nonviolent conflict resolution even became part of the definition of modernity. Thus, in this worldview, the sharp rejection of violence goes hand in hand with a certain downplaying of its presence. As liberals kept their eyes fixed firmly on the bright future to come, they looked on the bad old ways, now on their way out, with impatience, and without much real interest. The theories of globalization so fashionable at present, incidentally, have often simply adopted certain premises of the old modernization theory (see Knöbl 2007, 54ff.); they too see the occurrence of conflicts and wars merely as a sign of a lack of cosmopolitanism, and there is therefore no need to subject them to further scrutiny.

Even classical Marxism is a descendant of the liberal worldview when it comes to this faith in the future. Its exponents, it is true, emphasized the violent enforcement of the capitalist mode of production, the unrelenting material constraints concealed behind freely made contracts, and the class rule underlying the equality of individuals. So it didn't weigh heavily on their conscience that class rule could probably be overcome only by violent means or that, even well after the victory of the revolution, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would have to suppress its opponents by force. But, in a sense, classical Marxism merely pushed the liberal worldview one era further: *after* the violence-necessitating global upheavals, Marxists envisaged the rise of a social order with no place for violence—in the shape of the universal and free association of producers. Thus, for Marxism, the end of violent social conflicts would ultimately result from the disappearance of all divergent interests in a totally just, spontaneously self-regulating system. As all wars or ethnic conflicts were understood as the expression of class contradictions, they would vanish when class conflicts came to an end.

Since the nineteenth century, then, (Western) social theory has largely been characterized by fundamental and deep-seated liberal assumptions, as a result of which violence has been ignored. Examination of the topic of war in the modern era—and thus the unavoidable questioning of those fundamental assumptions—is bound, therefore, to result in theoretical revisions and reorientations. It is also clear that getting to grips with forms of international violence is not something we might safely leave to the subdiscipline of "military sociology" and thus "exoticize" with respect to its significance to social theory. Rather, we can expect detailed



consideration of the topic of war to advance the discipline's *theoretical* development, or at least to provide pointers to the construction of a more empirically convincing sociological theory and theory of modernity. For if we fail to take account of war, we can understand neither the constitution of modernity through the *nation-state*—rather than transnational processes—nor many of the social and cultural changes that have occurred in the modern age. Revolutions, shifts in class structures, and the extension and universalization of rights or upheavals in artistic and aesthetic fields are phenomena that have often been very closely bound up with the consequences of wars. Ignoring the question of the role played by military conflicts in the genesis and form of modernity inevitably results in sociological blind spots. Wars, which will not, presumably, be disappearing any time soon, can then be understood—as liberal theorists have suggested time and again—merely as a barbaric relic, as the “re-lapse” of civilized societies into cultural stages believed long since overcome rather than a *constitutive* element of the modern age, as momentous events that *change* the course of history. If sociology continues to argue in this way, if it fails to grasp the significance of wars and continues to suppress them, it will be squandering major opportunities to analyze the contemporary era—with far-reaching consequences for the future of the discipline.

So war is a field well worth researching, especially from a theoretical standpoint. But why should examination of the *history* of social theory be such a promising source of insight if (as indicated above) since its foundation sociology has never seemed to get very far with the topic of war? The answer begins to emerge from the following facts. The discipline, it is true, has never featured a stable and long-standing focus on “war” comparable to that on “social inequality,” for example. Yet it has produced individual analyses here and there that are worth looking at if we want to understand why the social sciences in general and sociology in particular, with all their blind spots, have become what they are—but especially if we are in search of ideas that might still be a source of inspiration today. Such analyses are not simply sitting there ripe for the picking; there is no canon of classical texts on war and peace by social theorists, let alone genuine sociologists, that would provide a rapid and representative overview of the field. If we want to uncover *this* aspect of the sociological inheritance, we really have to look for it, setting off along seemingly remote paths as well as those that lead deep into the prehistory of social theory; only then will we understand why modern-day social

scientists answer questions about war and peace just as they do. Four conceptual or methodological remarks are necessary at this point in order to avoid misunderstandings from the outset.

1. We quite consciously do *not* refer to “sociology” or “social sciences” in the title of this book. Instead, we use the terms “social thought” and “social theory.” This choice of terminology has at least two consequences. “Social theory” (see Joas/Knöbl 2009, ix ff.) refers to systematic reflection on social realities and putative regularities of social life; but there is also an element of (critical) theoretical strategy to the term, which was after all coined and deployed toward the end of the nineteenth century (in the Anglo-American world) as a means of questioning overt and covert utilitarian premises in the social sciences. Social theory and—with an even broader meaning—social thought are thus essentially the analysis of social action, social order, and social change (1ff.); at the same time, such analysis inevitably comes up against normative questions, and those engaged in it are compelled to take some kind of position on these questions. This is plainly apparent, for example, in the “genre” of sociological analyses of the contemporary world (such as theories of modernity). All of this means (to turn to those consequences we mentioned) that, *first*, examination of the relationship between social theory and war must be both wide-ranging and focused. It must be wide-ranging because ideas about social action, social order, and social change on the one hand and war on the other were never limited to just one discipline. Analyses of these things have been produced (and are produced still) within economics and political science, history and philosophy—though we should bear in mind that before the nineteenth century disciplinary boundaries were blurred anyway. In what follows, therefore, we are not concerned to keep strictly within the confines of the discipline of sociology, though we are both sociologists. We feel that debates on who is or is not a genuine sociological pioneer are quite unhelpful: sociology is certainly active in the domain of social theory but is not alone there. So we discuss a number of authors not usually counted among the subject’s ancestral lineage. Our approach is inter- or transdisciplinary and thus “wide-ranging” in the sense of a “post-disciplinary history of disciplines” (Joas 1999a). *Second*, however, the notion of “social theory” compels us to focus our attention. Because we are concerned with the abstract problems of action, order, and change, we are not interested in every social scientific analysis ever published on the topic of war: detail-rich findings by military sociologists on the ethnic or class composition of ground forces are of as little interest

to us here as analyses of key players' decision-making behavior in crisis situations by international relations scholars. Only those research findings, observations, and reflections that touch on the field of social theory, defined in abstract terms above, are of relevance to us here, which is why we feel free to ignore large swathes of the social scientific literature on war. We do discuss a fair number of thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular who are also key figures in social philosophy and/or political philosophy. But we believe that our social theory focus on the problems of action, order, and change provides new insights into the often quite peculiar highways and byways of thinking on war and peace. If we therefore opt not to consider certain issues or adopt a different perspective, this is not a matter—to use Max Weber's terms—of a value judgment (*Werturteil*) but merely a value relation (*Wertbeziehung*); the problems with which we are concerned are simply different from those dealt with in parts of the literature or the various disciplines mentioned above.

2. This should also make it clear that our intention here is not to put forward a novel social theory that is “sensitive to war.” Our project is reconstructive and thus far more modest. Of course, there may be implications for social theory. As our jaunt through the history of social theories on war will show, attempts to trace war back to single factors (whether premodern values, economic interests, or actors' irrational actions) have always been doomed to failure. It is instead those theoretical approaches that eschewed historical teleologies or overly simplistic models of action that have proved closer to reality. We might put it like this. Reflections on war and peace throughout history not only feature arguments of remarkable contemporary relevance that indicate why some of the models of peace and strategies for avoiding war much discussed at present—whether they refer to the peace-promoting effects of democracy or global trade—should be viewed with skepticism; analysis of the debates on war also opens our eyes to the whole range of human motives for action and the complexity of processes of social change, enabling insights that deserve greater emphasis within contemporary social theory (see Joas/Knöbl 2009).

This brings us to the question of the relationship between our project and recent efforts within the discipline of international relations to forge links with sociology, with some referring to a “social theory of international politics” and “sociological turn” (Wendt 2010, 20) in this context. The point of departure for this shift toward sociology is the insight that proceeding solely on “realist” or “neorealist” premises, in other words

assuming the rationality of state actors in the face of an allegedly anarchic state system, is very unlikely to further advance our understanding (for an overall survey, see Menzel 2001). So a species of thought enriched by institutionalism, constructivism, and cultural theory has now arrived in international relations, and as a result the normative premises and values of actors *in* institutions have received increasing emphasis. It remains doubtful, however, whether this opening and sociologization of the theory of international relations has gone far enough. Has full account really been taken of the wealth of action motives discussed in social theory? Or have international relations scholars, while making reference to the institutional and cultural shaping of actors and their intentions, focused on simple alternatives such as “instrumentally rational vs. value rational action” or dichotomies such as “materialism vs. idealism,” “structure vs. action,” or “individualism vs. holism” (see Wendt 2010), thus precipitately narrowing the debate? In addition, for disciplinary reasons, even theorists of international relations that see themselves as close to sociology tend to view “domestic factors” in the formation of state identities as the concern of other disciplines (Wendt 2010, 11), leading to the neglect of key issues in social theory—such as social order and social change.

Remarkably enough, similar questions can also be posed regarding sociologists’ attempts to move closer to international relations. Here, it is chiefly authors in the field of historical sociology who have striven to incorporate ideas from international relations (see Hobden 1998; Hobson 2000; Sindjoun 2002; Hobden/Hobson 2002). This move, however, has also failed to go far enough. What these authors have taken up, first and foremost, are “realist” positions and thus ones that favor an instrumentally rational model of action; as a result, they have in fact fallen behind the efforts currently being made to sociologize international relations (Hobson 2000, 181ff.; Knöbl 2011). We believe, therefore, that only a thorough analysis of the history of thinking about war can cast light on these foreshortened efforts, that it is only by reconstructing this substantial, though sometimes half-hidden legacy of social theory that we can lay the foundations for the construction of empirically adequate theories.

3. Our interests here are limited in another sense as well. However narrowly or broadly the social sciences may be defined and however great the theoretical aspirations that are linked with our historical exploration—what we are doing here does not come close to being a comprehensive discourse analysis of war. But because a young German historian has taken on this hugely ambitious task more or less concurrently with

our own efforts here, it may be helpful to make a few remarks on how our aims relate to his.

We are referring to Jörn Leonhard's extensive study on the interpretation of war and definition of the nation in Europe und the United States between 1750 and 1914 (Leonhard 2008). In contrast to many authors influenced by Michel Foucault, his discourse analysis is not conceived as the mere "observation" of texts and their structures, as if it were possible to rise above the specific arguments in the source texts without adopting any sort of position on them. For him, discourses are relations "between speakers and addressees concerned with the appropriation of experience" (18). These relations are of course facilitated or limited by structural parameters but still retain their core communicative quality. A discourse analysis of this kind must address the arguments themselves. In this sense it also differs from conceptual history, as it deals not only with specific concepts or conceptual fields but with the interplay of perceptions and experiences, their interpretation and how they serve to guide actions.

A historical discourse analysis of this kind must attempt not only to interpret revealing texts but to attain a representative material basis. A discursive history must therefore systematically seek out all texts relevant to the selected topic. This includes not only books and journal articles but also newspapers, leaflets, sermons, and much more besides. Such a history must develop a high degree of awareness of the mediality of these texts, of anticipated readers and the constraints of the selected genre. It must pay attention to any national peculiarities the material may contain while always bearing in mind how much various national developments are mutually entangled. In European history especially, the interactions between "nations"—if we can use the term at all without lapsing into anachronism—has been intensive. Perceptions have often been mutual in character; the roots of many instances of self-definition have lain in a conscious need for one group to mark itself off from others; and the processing of experiences has rarely remained limited to those immediately involved. But however interested we may be in the diversity of national paths, we must not neglect the internal plurality of thought in the different nations.

Approaching things as Leonhard does, it becomes evident that if we want to grasp the true dynamics of the (always situational) processing of war experiences and their translation into political action, schematic descriptions of different national attitudes to war are quite inadequate. Just one example will suffice to illustrate this. The intensity of war experi-