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A liberal tries to be conscientious about teaching war in the shadow of Sir Michael Howard

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Abstract
A reflection on teaching an undergraduate tutorial course that had been set up by Sir Michael Howard and the way that undergraduate teaching of matters of war and peace develops not only in line with developments in historiography but in the mirror of historical events. Professor Howard's writing is useful in making sense of this.

I did not meet Sir Michael Howard until many years after I was appointed to a college teaching fellowship at Pembroke College, Oxford but in some respects his legacy was shaping my teaching practices from my arrival in 1997. It was very much standard practice in the late 1990s for new arrivals In Oxford to take on a 'wide' teaching portfolio and as a result I found myself teaching first year undergraduates a paper entitled 'Theories of War and Peace 1890-1914' from my third term at Pembroke College. There was a general perception in the university that I could take on teaching the 'war stuff'. A paper which was about the intellectual debates about the morality and viability of war in the generation before the Great War seemed an obvious fit for someone who was working on a social/cultural history of Britain during the First World War, and in particular on the issue of public opinion at the outbreak of the war. This certainly meant that I was considered someone who had a responsibility to teach and mark a legacy paper from the time of Michael Howard.

The Oxford 'Optional Subject' is a text-based paper and although I had considerable experience of teaching outline papers in Cambridge in my role there as a Junior Research Fellow, teaching a paper based on close reading was a new experience for me. The particular texts involved were Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (1911),

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Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War* (1912), Benjamin Kidd, *Social Evolution* (1894), Karl Liebknecht, *Militarism and Anti-militarism* (1917) and Ivan (Jan de) Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible*? (1899).[1] There was also a selection of other documents such as the Stuttgart Resolution, some Italian protofascist/futurist essays in an edited collection and some of the proceedings of the Hague Conferences. Of these I had read precisely one, *The Great illusion,* before getting the job!

This was a challenging set of readings for someone who had serious doubts about their relationship to intellectual history. I had enjoyed studying the early political thought paper in Cambridge, particularly the class which was run by Quentin Skinner but had also found it very intimidating. I had not taught anything quite like it in my five years of teaching as a Research Fellow. This nervousness was compounded by the lack of serious secondary work on most of these authors. At this time there was no detailed study of Norman Angell and I was very surprised to find how little serious work there had been on Ivan Bloch. There were a few glimpses of light. My predecessor as a Junior Research Fellow in Cambridge and my soon to be Oxford colleague, Nick Stargardt had written *The German idea of Militarism* which was a fine study of left/liberal thinking in Imperial Germany.[2] This suggested that the idea of militarism was itself largely a product of the critique of militarism. The study was an invaluable resource when teaching Liebknecht. Paul Crook, as well as writing a biography of Benjamin Kidd, had written the excitingly revisionist *Darwin, War and History*.[3] For Bernhardi, there was the invaluable Roger Chickering, *We men who feel most German* on Pan-Germanism.[4] I also found myself digging back into a much older generation of historiography, particularly Gerhard Ritter's *The Sword and the Sceptre*.[5]

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[1] Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage,* (London: Heinemann, 3rd edn., 1911); Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War* (London: E. Arnold, 1912); Benjamin Kidd, *Social Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1894); Karl P.A.F. Liebknecht, *Militarism and Anti-militarism* (Glasgow: Socialist Labour Press, 1917); Jan Bloch (ed. W.T. Stead), *Is War Now Impossible? Being an Abridgement of 'The War of the Future in its Technical, Economic and Political Relations'*, (London: Grant Richards, 1899).

[2] Nicholas Stargardt, *The German Idea of Militarism: Radical and Socialist Critics, 1866-1914,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[3] David P. Crook, *Darwinism, War, and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the 'Origin of Species' to the First World War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[4] Roger Chickering, *We men who feel most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886-1914,* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984.

[5] Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Sceptre: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, 4 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1972-73).

A couple of years into my teaching of the paper my then colleague Niall Ferguson published *The Pity of War*.[6] Niall, like other academics who are more disciplined than I am, can be quite parsimonious in connecting his teaching to his writing and the set texts for 'Theories of War and Peace' get a lot of attention in early sections of the book. In particular, his take on Norman Angell as being in essence a navalist Northcliffe propagandist because he was employed by the continental *Daily Mail* is presented. This was a view which I treated with a lot of scepticism at the time and which still does not convince me.

Over the time I taught the paper other useful secondary work began to appear, for example Martin Ceadel's definitive biography of Norman Angell which came out in 2009.[7] The growth of JSTOR allowed new articles to be discovered on a yearly basis but all in all, there was not a great deal of secondary literature to support the primary texts.

What was most lacking though was a key to understanding the paper overall – and indeed an introductory text for my students. This was why I turned to *War and the Liberal Conscience*.[8] It should be said that very little of the text *directly* addresses the era immediately before the First World War. What it did provide was a masterclass in what might be called the conceptual underpinnings of the paper, the long view of the way that liberalism, democracy and nationalism had interacted since the enlightenment. This was the book that most firmly located the paper as a history of ideas and also as part of socio-cultural history. The relevant chapter 'The Coming of the First World War' in particular recognised the degree to which the debate about war and peace had become entwined with the class politics of the era and the responses to mass democracy. It also pointed to the progressive faith that through sufficient education mankind might be persuaded to recognise the folly of faith in violence. But ultimately of course, the chapter was tragic in tone, the war did come, peace was not established and liberals were forced back to square one. This of course was the recurring theme of the book: the ongoing and unavoidable struggle against the darker forces of political life.

So inspired, I set out on a nearly twenty-year struggle with the Optional Subject paper. In terms of teaching, I joined a lecture circus and took on the responsibility of lecturing on 'War and Social Darwinism' which was a chance to set the perspectives of peace biology and dysgenic fears which had been uncovered by Paul Crook alongside more

[6] Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War,* (London: Allen Lane, 1998).
[7] Martin Ceadel, *Living the Great Illusion: Sir Norman Angell, 1872-1967,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[8] Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience,* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), especially pp. 52-72.

conventional ideas about social Darwinism as a driver of militarist valorisation of natural struggle. Tutorial teaching involved single or paired tutorials closely focused on reading the set texts. The students, mostly but not exclusively young men with an interest in military history, generally responded well to this challenge. Sometimes a tutorial would focus very directly on the text and sometimes on the overarching 'spirit of the age' that the text represented.

One self-criticism that seems unavoidable now is that to some extent I conceptualised the era 1890-1914 specifically as that of an armed peace or a 'cold war'. If I was going back to it now, I think I would place much more stress on the relentless imperial wars of the era as the background to these debates. Whether we should reconceptualise the 'Scramble for Africa' as 'World War Zero' is open for debate, but despite the fact that there was a robust liberal critique of imperialism it is difficult to deny that the early twentieth century was an era of compartmentalisation where thinking about 'small wars' differed significantly from thinking about large ones.[9] It is also a shame that the paper did not provide space for an emergent feminist pacifism. One thing that struck me in recent years was that international feminism proved more robust as an anti-war movement in 1914-1915 than international socialism.

Sometimes direct encounter with the texts produced moments of epiphany. The most serious of these was with Bloch. Having read in countless secondary works how Bloch had accurately foretold the nature of the First World War I was genuinely a bit shocked to realise how spurious much of his reasoning had been. Far from being the civilian prophet who exposed the stupidity of the military mind it became clear that his use of data and extrapolations about infantry rifle fire were very largely nonsense. His strategic level predictions seemed just as fundamentally flawed. Whilst he correctly foresaw that strain on the civilian economy would become a decisive element in a static war of entrenchment his confident prediction that Russia would be the inevitable victor of such a struggle by virtue of its agrarian economy seemed seriously at odds with his vaunted prophetic genius! This led to my own speculation (not dissimilar to Ferguson's on Angell) that Bloch might in fact have been serving Russian propagandist purposes to buy time for Tsarist economic development during a window of vulnerability. The larger point of the relationship between Bloch's writing and the Tsar's sponsorship of the Hague conferences would still stand but with a slightly less idealistic underpinning.

[9] For the idea of 'World War Zero', see Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution,* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), pp. 49-56. For the complexities of contemporary thought before the First World War on the differences between 'small wars' and larger, continental warfare, see Daniel Whittingham, *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way in Warfare,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 37-112.

But as much as the texts, it was the times that began to gradually impinge on my teaching of the paper and reshape my thinking. To understand how this was the case it is worth considering the circumstances in which the paper was originally created and the way in which I found myself responding to changed circumstances.

Sir Michael Howard's time in Oxford coincided with the climax of the Cold War from 1977 until 1990, a time when thinking about armaments, deterrence and existential risk was an absolute imperative. Whilst he was a Professor in Oxford, first as the Chichele Professor of the History of War at All Souls and then as the Regius Professor of Modern History, I had been a student CND member engaging in direct action outside USAF airbases. Thinking about war and peace was a deeply serious business in those years and one which was to a large extent unavoidable for Professor and student alike.

I arrived in Oxford in a remarkably different world just seven years later. The post-Cold War conflict in the Balkans was also a very serious business, but it was framed in very different terms – as an issue of humanitarian intervention. Taking military steps was not seen as entering into a war so much as bringing a war to an end. Even the long paramilitary struggle in Northern Ireland had significantly wound down by 1997. The British government had begun to cash in on the 'peace dividend' to reduce military expenditure and free up resources for other purposes whilst at the same time the internal argument within the Labour Party over unilateral nuclear disarmament had been settled in favour of the retained deterrent largely because few seriously anticipated it would actually be needed in a world where multilateral nuclear arms control had actually started to succeed. Although nobody was quite claiming that war had been relegated to the dustbin of history there was a definite sense that it was no longer a pressingly important subject for historical study.

Certainly war was playing a diminishing part on the general syllabus of the Oxford History Faculty. Out of over a hundred full time post holders there were perhaps four who could be described as 'military historians' in the sense of studying operations or strategy, and none of them apart from the Chichele Professor specialised in the post-1850 period.

By 1997 I was probably a fairly mainstream left-liberal, sympathetic after massacres in Rwanda and Srebenica to the idea that western powers should exercise their military might in order to protect vulnerable populations. 'Anti-war' thinking on the left seemed to be reduced to unconditional pacifism which I could respect, hyper-legalistic qualms that often seemed obtuse in the face of war crimes and at worst a knee jerk anti-American 'revolutionary defeatism' on the hard left which was (and remains) simply risible. The anti-intervention arguments from the right which were sometimes

given a veneer of IR realism usually seemed to amount to callous indifference with a leavening of 'lesser breeds' racism.

As we moved into an era of peace promotion through precision bombing, a lot of the old arguments about war and peace seemed to have lost relevance from a liberal standpoint. And initially 9/11 had much less impact on this than we might now expect. The rapid invocation of Article 5 by NATO countries in support of the USA seemed entirely credible from a 'defensive' just war point of view in light of the attack having obviously been planned from Afghanistan by a group that the Taliban government had clearly sheltered. Also, and perhaps equally importantly, the stunning speed of the overthrow of that government initially appeared to reinforce the idea that military intervention could now be conducted in a way that was neither particularly bloody or expensive (even Afghan civilian casualties did not initially seem particularly severe or disproportionate compared to the bloody ongoing conflict in that country before 2001).

Perhaps more surprisingly, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not immediately seem a turning point. The initial responses to the invasion still remained mostly within the parameters established in the previous decade. The parliamentary debate revolved to a very large extent around the issues of legality and the use of intelligence. Popular protest was driven by the same combination of routine anti-imperialism and humanitarian pacifism, this time with an important overlap with British Muslim sentiment angered by another western military intervention in the Middle East. Yet the anti-war critique, even though it brought much larger numbers out on to the streets than previous cases was still focused on a fairly narrow set of issues, in particular a revulsion at possible civilian casualties in Iraq. There was little sense amongst either the opponents of the invasion or the mostly reluctant supporters of it that this was an action that would have particularly serious costs for those conducting the invasion.

So for a while the Optional Subject texts seemed to remain firmly within the bounds of historical but not contemporary interest. Of course there were some odd resonances; Bernhardi's insistence that it was the moral duty of a statesman to begin a pre-emptive war before the potential enemy had achieved its full capability and that to not start such a war would be in itself a crime, could not help seem bitterly ironic during the discussions of putative Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). But it took longer for some of the other texts to start to connect.

Bloch's work started to feel less relevant in its specifics and more an object lesson in the problems of military futurism. How does technology *actually* shape the character of wars and can it in a meaningful sense 'abolish war'? The era of Mutually Assured Destruction still applied on one level but it was accompanied by a sense that if anything

technology might make it a little too easy to engage in targeted violence at little cost. Still, even as the Global War On Terror (GWOT) unfolded it was accompanied by punditry about how 'conventional war' was no longer a possibility. Mass conflict between conventional armies on the plains of Eurasia would become a historical footnote.

Norman Angell had never fallen into Bloch's trap of declaring war impossible, but he had clearly identified it as irrational. Going beyond the mid-nineteenth-century bromides about the mutual benefits of free trade he had clearly identified that financial entanglement would create a situation in the early twentieth century where the damage done by conflict to the victor would clearly and massively outweigh any potential gains from conquest. In a broad sense of course, the First World War had proven him right, although Angell, rather like John Maynard Keynes who in some respects reinvigorated the Angell critique in the *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, took the inviolability of private property too much for granted *a priori*.[10]

What Angell never fully addressed was what if people did not behave according to the logic of *Homo Economicus*? His work did recognise the power of emotions of fear and pride but in the end put faith in the ability of rational argument to overcome them. For Angell, war should go the way of duelling – a long accepted but obviously obsolete practice. In that respect Angell felt very resonant with contemporary 'end of history' globalists and in particular the popularisers of 'interdependency' as a cure for war. Thomas Friedman in particular seemed remarkably similar as a journalist, propagandist and pundit.

In some respects, Benjamin Kidd provided exactly the perspectives Angell lacked. The paradox at the heart of *Social Evolution* was that individual calculation of interest would produce a sub-optimum strategy in a competitive world. For Kidd, this provided a rationale for religion as a cultural adaptation that would lead to individuals being willing to sacrifice their individual interests on behalf of a collectivity. This in fact also extended to the social order. Kidd assumed that for most people a radical redistribution of power and wealth would be in their individual interests, but that for society as a whole, this would be disastrous. Religion or something like religion as a 'suprarational' force would overcome this problem. Again, this became interesting in light of the rather different approaches of contemporary 'evolutionist' polemicists who dismissed religion as an unhelpful 'meme'.

Kidd was also the author who directly addressed the issue of imperialism as the central force of his time, particularly the extension of imperial rule to the control of the

[10] John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace,* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

resources of the tropical world. On the whole, Kidd in the 1890s saw this as both progressive and inevitable, but as the challenge of the immediate future. That in turn resonated quite strongly as the critiques of neo-Imperialism gained strength in the early part of the twenty first century.

Over time, I grew more and more to appreciate the critiques of Karl Liebknecht who perhaps saw most clearly the connections between imperial ambitions, domestic political economy, culture and education and war and peace. Although he was responding specifically to the 'ideal type' of the threat that was represented by the specific German version of military predominance in the political system he was clear sighted enough to see variations of the dynamic at work across the world. So the lauding of the Swiss militia system by some on the left struck him as dangerously innocent when the internal class uses of armed force were considered.

Liebknecht's insistence in seeing militarism as a *system* as a threat and a burden which was relevant in times of peace as well as war became perhaps the most resonant of all. As the trillion dollar costs of the GWOT mounted to the benefit of sundry profiteers, as the erosion of trust in government in the aftermath of the search for WMD and the suspension of basic ethical and legal behaviour exemplified by 'extraordinary rendition' and 'enhanced interrogation', and as the ongoing campaign produced increasing blow back in home-grown terrorism, community division, radicalisation, domestic surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties, it became clear that whether a war was formally declared or not was secondary to the way military 'solutions' would manifest thousands of new problems.

So the paper began to take on new life in these shifting contexts. Nevertheless, it was also hard to sustain in a university where relatively few permanent postholders were willing to commit to the teaching, and the paper was examined for the last time in 2010. This allowed the postholders who had been teaching the paper to develop new courses which is always an important part of syllabus renewal.

What did I get from teaching the paper? There was a lot of stimuli from eager students trying to make sense of century old texts both within their own historical context and also in terms of things that interested them in their own world. Most terms I started nervous about teaching the material and ended up glad that I had. But above all it forced me to stand back and think about thinking about war and peace.

This then is where revisiting Michael Howard's work can be so valuable. His ability to show that liberal abstractions about war as a distinct phenomenon from an imagined peaceful normality were always problematic in the past inspires the thought that these abstractions continue to be unhelpful in the present. Furthermore, liberal double think on acceptable uses of political violence can itself ironically lead to valorisation of 'noble

causes' without a clear-sighted view of what that violence really looks like in humanitarian terms. Howard is merciless on the arrogance, ignorance and confusion of liberal thinking. But he is never merely cynical. He also recognises the enormous value in the pursuit of international community in creating standards.

Perhaps the most resonant thing though was the recognition that thinking about war and peace might involve a diversity of values and that liberals should not take for granted that their assumptions about the world were shared by other state and non-state actors. It was far too easy in the late 1990s to assume that peaceful globalisation in the mode of Norman Angell was winning out. Teaching a course on the plurality of ideas about war and peace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ought to have been much more of a warning.

To find myself trying to write this piece amid the horrors of war in Ukraine has been a difficult experience. The dilemma of trying to work out the ethics of correct response to a self-evidently 'just war', whilst retaining a proper sense of both prudence and humanity in the face of the enormous destructive potential of modern weapons where a bad actor can make the choice of devastating escalation, is the first obvious problem. So is the enormous difficulty of reconciling a just peace with the hugely divergent perspectives of the combatant parties. Less obvious is the renewed threat of domestic militarisation in the west as a choice when so many other urgent and indeed existential threats also require urgent responses. So many of the problems that Sir Michael Howard spent his life struggling with have re-emerged with tremendous urgency. His view was that peace was not something that would simply happen in the international order, but that there would need to be an active struggle to establish it every single day, and that mankind could not be freed of that inexorable duty.