Theory Talks

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is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

PETER W. SINGER ON CHILD SOLDIERS, PRIVATE SOLDIERS AND ROBOT SOLDIERS

IR is typically all about conflicts between nation-states, fought out by national armies. But what if the majority of combatants in reality is not represented by the image of a soldier in a uniform fighting for patriotic commitment to his flag? Peter W. Singer has made a point of showing how warfare is not the exclusive terrain of national soldiers, but rather a heterogeneous field of children, men and women fighting for all kinds of motivations. In this *Talk*, he explains, amongst others, how this requires a profound reframing of IR; how doing interesting research requires the courage to distance oneself from dominant opinions, and how robotics will change the nature of warfare forever.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I believe the biggest challenge is how we continue to hold on to old theories, old frameworks, that actually do not apply to our current reality. That is, we have a field that continually keeps its head in the sand, while the sands underneath it are shifting. And my work has been, in many ways, dedicated to trying to challenge some of those aspects. Take, for example, the concept that the state is the only player in international relations. When I was in graduate school, that was something which was very much forced upon us. People would argue back against this state only approach with examples from human rights or environmental issues, and the response always made was: 'oh, well, but those are just soft issues – when it comes to security, of course, the state is the only player'. That's what Corporate Warriors was about: it argued that even in this realm of security (considered the core of state-hood), the state is not the only player. Even more, states were becoming dependent on private military firms (PMCs); even the most powerful states, to carry out their military tasks. And this has several policy implications for warfare, just as the question of who states are having to face up against with their armies: which is the state that the US is fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan?

We keep holding on to those categories frantically, because they supply us with frameworks we deem necessary for understanding what's going on: in policy terms, without the notion of states, we simply wouldn't know what to do, how to intervene in the world out there. But when we enter situations and we only look at them the way we want them to be, instead of the way they

really are, that's when we make some of our worst mistakes – and Iraq would be a great example of that.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

All of us are shaped by our own experiences, so for me it's a lot about how I grew up (you know, as a kid I played lots with toy soldiers and with Star Wars action figures!). I come from a family that has a good deal of military background, that may have shaped my understanding. When I was in grad school a lot of fundamental transition was taking place in the world (the Cold War had just ended) and I had some fantastic professors when I was there, amongst which the great late Samuel Huntington, who was a particular inspiration. You might agree or disagree with him, but he was a titan of the field because he co-determined the framework in the debate of how we would explore IR. And that's true whether you talk about civil-military relations or if you're looking at issues of culture and war.

For this new book on robotics and war, it again comes out of my personal experience of growing up loving these topics, but it also comes out of a sense of frustration. As I talk about in the book, I would go to a series of conferences, which were bringing together really some of the major personalities and players in the security studies field as well as from the Pentagon; they would talk about what's new and revolutionary in war, and yet, here we were, using robots – and no-one was even mentioning it! Let alone that anyone was wrestling with the impact of it, the trends this was following, or the ethical and legal issues that would arise from it, how it would impact war initiation, how war is fought and ended... No one was willing to talk about the employment of drones in war, because as one person put it: 'it's mere science-fiction'.

Well, guess what: it's not mere science fiction: in the US army, we currently have more than 7.000 drones in the air and more than 12.000 unmanned ground systems. In our operations, we use them every single day. And, to give you an idea of where we are, these are just your Model T Ford, the Wright Brother's Flyer – compared to what's coming. So it was in a sense a little bit of a frustration with our field that I was wrestling with. And that set me out on a journey. The same fascination linked to frustration has formed the driving force behind each and every investigation I did.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

Don't take scorn or 'no' for an answer. My experience, in terms of my own work, is an interesting example hereof. As my dissertation topic, I wanted to look at private military companies, and I was told by a very distinguished professor that I would do well to instead quit graduate school and go work in Hollywood, for thinking about fictional topics such as private companies in war. And yet, my dissertation lead to my book *Corporate Warriors*, and we have more private contractors in Iraq now than US soldiers. All the controversies that have come out of Iraq, such as the torturing in Abu-Ghraib involving 'interpreters' from private security companies and the 2004 shootings in Fallujah involving Blackwater personnel, all center around private military contractors.

The first time I presented the topic of my second book, on child soldiers, a Harvard professor told me I was 'making it up': she didn't believe the issue of child soldiers mattered, let alone existed. And that's of course an absurdity, since there are presently more than 300.000 child soldiers active. Plus, the issues that come out of studying child soldiers cover everything from legal and ethical questions to the challenges that soldiers face in the battlefield, like being fired on by young children. The very first US combat casualty in Afghanistan, a Green Beret, was killed by a 14-year-old sniper.

The same goes for a book on robotics and war: it is considered a major career risk to research and write a serious book on what many people insist is science-fiction. I also doubled down the risk factor in this book by writing it in a way I wanted to write it. It is a very pop-culture book, lots of anecdotes, lots of stories in it, but it also refers to Hobbes. It has IR theory but also discusses everything from Star Wars to Gilmore Girls. Hopefully, it makes people laugh out loud at some point in the reading of it. But, importantly, it has taken robotics out of science fiction and into policy.

So the lesson would be: believe in yourself. If you think you have come across an interesting and important topic and you get scrutinized by the old guard, don't take "no" for an answer. A subject isn't interesting because an authority thinks it is so.

I especially think that the old idea of a sort of apprenticeship model is one that really doesn't drive the best work. But yet, that is how a lot of research is being done in our field: we take what some professor has done, and some advisee tweaks it just a slight bit. That's not how we get good research is done, and that's not how good theory is built.

You have gained fame for your book *Corporate Warriors* on the corporate security sector or private military companies (PMCs) as you call them. Since, publications on the subject have proliferated. But data is hard to come by – because governments are reluctant to disclose information and because the companies involved invoke contractual privacy. How did you manage to get by your data?

Research, research, research. Gather each and every book or article that relates even vaguely to the topic. I picked things from history, political science, economics… One of the challenges of IR is that people only read IR. Well, guess what: the world doesn't work in these stove-pipes. Each issue in the field, including PMCs, has aspects of it that concern, and are treated by, other epistemic communities such as law, history, economics, etc. Each one of those opens up new research pathways.

At the same time, of course, we live in a world were not everything is in books. The comedian Stephen Colbert jokes: 'I don't trust books, there's no heart'. So you interview, and not just in your own field and not just fellow academics, but everyone that matters to that topic of concern. And if it's a topic that's alive, there's likely to be some news connected to your topic. The idea here is that you can build a 365-degree picture of what we're looking at concerning your topic.

In the case of PMCs, I felt I was like a scientist, wanting to understand everything about this

strange animal: how does it behave, how is it structured, but also the context in which it grew and interacts with other species of actors out there.

The same is the case for *Children of War*: it's not just about reading the history or reading the latest issue of Security Studies, but jumping into the field and getting to know everything you can. Considering my last book, I talked to newspaper editors from Lebanon, to Human Rights Watch, to four-star generals and 19-year-old drone pilots, but also to insurgents from Iraq, to find out: what do they think about it?

The privatization of security, you argue, falls into a juridical gap or loophole: international law does not anticipate private military actors and few are the countries that have adopted domestic legislation. Is this a structural problem, or do you foresee a gradual abolishment of private actors, in the line of the anti-Blackwater legislation in Iraq and Afghanistan?

First comes awareness – and that's being built up – and then comes responses. Now, so far, responses have been ad hoc, coming at PMCs from the sides so to speak. We're still in the phase in which a multiplicity of actors is slowly recognizing first the existence and second the importance of PMCs, and the fact that law seems to lag behind on their existence.

A more important question, which basically puts your question in a wider way, is whether they are legitimate or not? It's not about their action, or if they commit a crime (many companies or peoples commit crimes, including in the military field of course), but it's literally: are they legitimate or not? And a related question would be: when do you hire them, and when do you not? It's not a question anymore "can contractors can do it?" It's rather: "should they?" We've been focused on the can part, and we should shift our attention to the should, which is a more fundamental question. Now, you see this sort of patchwork of regulation being built and expanding in different areas, from the US to Iraq, and that is how international law ultimately gets built. But we know there's an extreme lag-time.

In 1961, Eisenhower warned us for the pervasive influence of what he then famously dubbed the 'military industrial complex', referring to an essentially American dynamic. Is the private military industry essentially an American product?

This question is put from a very 20th-century mindset: we live in a global world, and industry is not structured along predominantly national lines. Executive Outcomes, a now defunct but heavily controversial company, came out of South Africa, so the industry does not only come out of the US or have a American only dynamic. Because of our size and military spending, the US is definitively an 800-pound gorilla in the market, but it is by no means a monopoly.

But interestingly, one can ask what Eisenhower would think about current developments. He only referred to defense manufacturing, and we have now moved into defense services as well. I think he would probably be rolling over in his grave if he saw that essentially military tasks have been handed over to civilians without any structures, regulation or planning in place.

In your latest book, *Wired for War*, you explain how technological change is transforming warfare, and how this 'impersonal' form of warfare is spreading throughout the world.

How pervasive is this tendency? Is technological innovation the new 'race to the bottom' which will replace nuclear buildup as the primary source of competition and thus tension between conflicting actors?

I think one tendency which we are observing is the 'open source phenomenon'. This tendency is not just limited to the software industry – we are increasingly using military technologies that are commercial and off the shelf, do it yourself. For example, the [Raven drone](#) is a drone US soldiers use in Iraq and Afghanistan; however, for about 1.000 US dollars you can build your own version of this drone.

Now whether you talk about this machine or some other low-cost weapon system like the AK47, the general tendency is towards flattening of the marketplace of war and the technologies used in it: not only because of low costs but also because of the (black) market as the prime forum of exchange of these items, the state no longer has exclusive access to the tools to effectively wage a war. In the past, due to the huge investments required to produce war machines, only strong states were able to show preponderance. During the 20th century, the industry changed dramatically, producing on the one hand highly capital and technology intensive systems like nuclear arms, but on the other very cheap and relatively simple weapons like the AK47 and some chemical weapons. If you wonder how so much civil conflict is possible, or why warlords and rogue states seem to proliferate, one question to ask would be: can it be that they endure simply because the weapons are so easy to make or to get by? Take a situation like that of the Lebanon war a few years ago, where Israel, the state with probably the most powerful army in the Middle East, is fighting a non-state actor, Hezbollah, a weird amalgam of a terrorist group, a political party and a social services organization with its own hospitals and schools. It may not be a state or formal military, but Hezbollah was able to fly four unmanned drones back and forth over Israel.

Another example would be a radical internet site that allowed you to detonate a roadside bomb in Iraq from your home computer in the US.

In order to understand what has happened, you can look at the software industry: it started with a couple of huge players, which increasingly faced competition from smart copycats and competitors improving on services or offering them for less. The landscape is flattening.

Both corporate security actors and high-tech or unarmed weapons are only available for those who can pay for them. Does this mean the prevalence of the market-logic over state control over violence, and if so, do you consider that something bad?

Just in order to show you how our world diverges from theory, in the book I tell the story of a group of college kids from Swartmore who fundraised money to do something about the genocide in Darfur. They then entered into negotiations with a private military company about the hire of robotic drones to deploy to Sudan. It does sound like a Hollywood movie, but it has become the world we live in. But I don't think that anyone planned this outcome, either of drones or of private military contractors. People take decisions within the constraints of the contexts and focused on resolving an issue in their own limited agenda. And increasingly, it

becomes more difficult for us as individuals to oversee the outcomes of our actions and choices, and so has it for states.

Existing theories we have do not appropriately deal with this randomness or unpredictability if you will. Theory and understanding generally lags behind on actual change 'out there.' An example is current thinking on civil-military relations, which is still largely based on Sam Huntington's '59 book *The Soldier and the State*. I think that we don't need an entirely new theory but rather an updating of existing work. It's no longer just the soldier and the state, as Huntington put it, but now it's also the market, which profoundly affects the relationship between soldier and states.

Last question. You've written on child soldiers, private soldiers, and robot soldiers. Why soldiers, and what's your next project going to be on?

First of all, the thread that connects all of those is that we have these assumptions about war and the warrior that no longer hold in their monopolies. When I say the word 'war' an image probably comes to your mind. It is probably a male soldier wearing a uniform. If the man is wearing a uniform, this means, of course, he is representing a nation-state military. That will inspire us to assume that this soldier will probably be inspired by patriotism, that he goes to war because of politics.

But that monopoly no longer holds true. War is fought by men, women, children (one out of every combatants today in the world is a child), and increasingly we see the human monopoly on war breaking and being supplemented by robots. The organizations these actors are fighting in are no longer just militaries, they are terrorist groups, insurgents, warlords, pirates, private military corporations, and mafias. And the motivating factors are not just politics: if your readers can find me one war that's exclusively driven by politics… That's the same for individual players in them. Granted, for some soldiers it's patriotism, for others it's private profit; for others it's religion – you name it. When we "assume," our assumptions set us up to fail, to make an "ass" out of "u" and "me."

Secondly, I'm actually doing a book right now that looks at another big change we're wising up to: the millennial generation. The Millennials are the ones born between 1980 and 2005; in raw numbers, they're about 1,25 the size of the baby boomers and 3 times the size of generation X. Just like the Baby Boomers had a huge impact on the world and on everything from politics to economics and society by their sheer weight of numbers, so this millennial generation, I argue, is already leaving its imprints upon our world. You can't write a history of the 1960s without writing about the baby boomers, and you won't be able to write about the present and future without mentioning the Millennials.

Peter W. Singer is the director of the 21st Century Defense Initiative and a senior fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings. Singer's research focuses on three core issues: the future of war, current U.S. defense needs and future priorities, and the future of the U.S. defense system. Singer lectures frequently to U.S. military audiences and is the author of several books and articles, including *Corporate Warriors* (2004) and *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (2009).

Related links

- [Profile at Brookings](#) Read Singer's *Wired for War? Robots and Military Doctrine* (Joint Forces Quarterly 2009) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Singer's *Military Robots and the Laws of War* (The New Atlantis, 2009) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Singer's *Seven Questions: The Hired Guns of Iraq* (Foreign Policy, 2007) [here](#)
- Read Singer's *Humanitarian Principles, Private Military Agents: Some Implications of the Privatized Military Industry for the Humanitarian Community* (Humanitarian Policy Group Report 22) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Singer's *Talk is Cheap: Getting Serious About Preventing Child Soldiers* (Cornell International Law Journal, 2004) [here](#) (pdf)