Thinking About War

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Sociologists know surprisingly little about war and seem to care even less. The number of works on war by sociologists that appear in any given year, irrespective of quality, is miniscule. This needs to change. As Leon

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Trotsky once said, “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

In the late 1970s historical sociologists discovered the centrality of war to the accounts they were developing of the dynamics of macrosocial change. As the framework for understanding historical change shifted from one focused primarily on the endogenous dynamics of a national society to one focused on interstate competition, the emphasis on economic and cultural factors was supplemented by a new understanding of the centrality of the state as a factor in social change. In what might be termed the neo-Weberian synthesis, historical sociologists discovered that war and preparation for war were central to the formation of the modern state: in Charles Tilly’s phrase, “War makes states, and states make war.” War, in Theda Skocpol’s brilliant reconceptualization of the sociology of revolution, was the key explanatory factor in the complex processes leading up to state collapse and popular insurgency (Skocpol, 1979). A talented and self-conscious group of historical sociologists and sociologically minded historians (e.g., Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, John Hall, Martin Shaw, Paul Kennedy, Arthur Marwick, and Jay Winter) was quick to note the manifold ways in which war affects social change, altering the terms of popular contention, changing fundamental cultural frameworks, retarding or accelerating economic growth, promoting citizenship and democracy, influencing the rise and fall of great powers. Within a few years, the work of these scholars had firmly placed war at the center of most accounts of macrohistorical change.

Yet, curiously, the actual business of war, the killing and the dying, remained a sort of black box, a largely unexplored area of research best left to the rather ghettoized subfield of military historians. The result was a sociology of war with combat left out. Not only is this odd, since killing and dying are at the heart of warfare, it is also a great pity. In recent years, paralleling the rise of historical sociology, there has been a renaissance among military historians. Beginning in 1976 with John Keegan’s efforts, in his *Face of Battle*, to write military history from the bottom up, to see battles from the point of view of ordinary soldiers, the frontier between military history and social history, once rigidly demarcated as if by a regiment of grenadier guards on parade, has now largely dissolved. Military historians now do real history. The new military history is no longer a dreary compilation of battles, heroics, leaders, and campaign plans. The new military historians have resituated warfare firmly and squarely in its social and cultural context.

Sociologists have been slow to catch on to this. Their ventures into the waters of military history have been attempts to grasp the impact of war on civilian society. “What did you do in the war, Mom?” is the programmatic slogan here. Without in the least minimizing the great worth of such studies,