

Book Reviews

The Social Construction of Man, the State, and War: Identity, Conflict, and Violence in the Former Yugoslavia. By FRANKE WILMER. New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp.368. \$24.95. ISBN: 0-415-92963-6.

There is no shortage of compelling explanations of Yugoslavia's bloody collapse, yet Franke Wilmer offers an account that is bold and innovative. While she is interested in the idea and practice of war in general, Wilmer specifically looks at the wars in the former Yugoslavia and asks three key questions: why now, why here and why so brutal?

For Wilmer, the key issue in politics is violence, of which 'ethnic war' is but one form (pp.x, 147, 240). Wilmer supplies a convincing answer to the 'why here' and 'why now' questions. The 'ethnic war' occurs when elites play the 'identity card', that is when they construct ethnicity as the only politically relevant identity. As a result, individual identities and, in turn, individual interests revolve around the exclusion of the threatening 'Other'. In the former Yugoslavia, the convergence of various factors eased such elite manipulation: the domestic and systemic instability, collective memories, corruptible media and the emergence of pathological and criminal paramilitary groups.

Wilmer correctly argues that such a 'causality bundle' cannot be explained by the mainstream theories of International Relations (IR) and that alternative frameworks are needed. As the title suggests, Wilmer directly takes on the famous paragon of realism in IR – Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War*. In terms of the epistemological commitments, Wilmer's framework can be regarded as constructivist and feminist. The author offers excellent discussions of the agent-structure problem, the role of language in the social construction of reality and knowledge, and the normalization of political violence. But it is her critical treatment of the state that is particularly captivating.

Wilmer argues that states exist so long as we, internal and external agents, invest them with meaning. The governments rely either on direct coercion or on extensive socialization to create and sustain the legitimacy of the state. Some agents can obviously contest the state's legitimacy, but as long as the most powerful agents support it, the state will remain the most important locus of politics and the most potent source of collective identities. Put otherwise, the state is a social process whereby human agents decide on the rules about who gets what, when, where, how, why, and in what proportion. For constructivists like Wilmer, the 'who' of politics is the critical variable. The rules of politics do not stem from a social contract, argues Wilmer, but from a '*perception of sameness, whether articulated in terms of narratives of organic sameness or narratives of shared historical experience*' (p.126). In this story, Yugoslavia collapsed when the most powerful agents – political, business and media elites – began to reject these rules and thus deny the state's legitimacy. Only a critical look at narrative practices allows us to understand how the 'identity card' is played.

Wilmer's research techniques are an interdisciplinary mix of discourse analysis and hard-nosed field research. Wilmer does a splendid job in collecting evidence from different narratives or, in her words, 'categories, stories, and

allegories' (but the chapter in which she 'lets the subjects speak' needs to be more smoothly incorporated in the structure of the book). Wilmer goes as deep as to analyze hate speech in Serbian 'turbo folk' music. She points out the high convergence of popular culture and war crimes by referring to the example of the marriage between 'the queen of turbo folk' Ceca and the war criminal Arkan in 1995. But how can we account for Ceca's astonishing popularity in Croatia and Bosnia, especially among Bosniak war veterans? Why did the British skinheads listen to Jamaican reggae music before committing race crimes in the 1970s? This question baffled sociologists for years.

Unfortunately, the 'why so brutal' question seems to be tackled only with respect to the policy of sexual violence against women in the former Yugoslavia, on which there is already a considerable stock of knowledge, in contrast to other such cases (e.g. the Soviet 'liberation' of Eastern Europe and Germany). Despite her introductory promise, Wilmer seems to shy away from a full psychological and cognitive analysis. The author revolves around Steven Kull's insight that in war 'things become very simple, very clear' (pp.108, 233), which means that the social construction of war aims to relieve the individuals of self-reflection, empathy, remorse and guilt, but she offers no empirical research to back this up. A look at, say, frontline soldier diaries would go a long way in revealing how such 'mental release' occurs.

Wilmer is to be applauded for engaging normative and policy questions. How can the brutality of 'ethnic conflict' be avoided? Liberal democracy is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for peace. Wilmer suggests that 'Communist states may have failed, but that does not mean that liberal states have yet succeeded' (p.129). A crucial part of the answer therefore lies in liberal education and the development of a more critical political culture (pp.235, 261, 265).

The political sphere examined by Wilmer turns out to be narrow. Even though the author probably sets out to collect all kinds of narratives, she ended up mostly talking to the educated, urban crowd, who generally opposed war (p.275). My count of the narratives which appear in the book leaves a distinct feeling that the author spent most of her time in Belgrade. Thus for example, because she never interviewed people in Herzegovina, one should question her suggestion that this region is the geographical source of Serb and Croat nationalism (p.161; also see p.102).

To her credit, Wilmer is aware that her methodological choices obviously raise the question of whether her observations can be generalized (p.244). The author is also aware that the historical variation introduced by way of vignettes and short illustrations (e.g. the Holocaust, apartheid) does not support sweeping claims.

Wilmer admits that she is no area specialist, but someone interested in studying the uses of the 'Other' to legitimize violence. While this is a fair caveat, it should be no excuse for insufficient background reading and sloppy editing. The author consults an impressive number of various works on Yugoslavia, including a seemingly exhaustive survey of 'local' writing on the wars published in the English language. But she also appears to take many shortcuts. Probably relying on the work by J.R. Lampe (1996), Wilmer claims that there were 168,000 Bosnian Muslims in the 'Independent Croatian State'. On the same page (p.40), the author asserts that the Kosovar Albanians were the 'only ethnic group' that did not participate in the anti-fascist struggle in the Second World War. Had Wilmer consulted all of the sources listed in her bibliography more closely, the

inaccuracy of the above claims would have been avoided. Finally, the book is plagued by poor editing, especially with respect to the spelling of Yugoslav names.

Despite these faults, I should commend Wilmer for writing an important book that suggests an alternative and, in my opinion, a very persuasive explanation for the differentiated zones of peace and war in world politics.

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A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide. By SAMANTHA POWER. New York: New Republic/Basic Books, 2002. Pp.610. €29.60/£22.00 (hb). ISBN 0-465-06150-8.

A Problem From Hell primarily investigates American responses to genocide in the course of the past century. In doing so Power combines a penetrating account of the successes, and mostly failures of human rights intervention with vibrant attention to the shocking details of atrocities emerging in different zones of war and political turmoil around the globe. But her agenda also casts a wider net. The book's energetic mix of legal scholarship and journalism has a lead analytical theme that runs through all the different chapters. What are the moral responsibilities and political implications that go hand in hand with power, in particular the capacity for military action by American governments in the name of humanitarian intervention? The answer to this question is not only a formidable endeavour as evidenced by Power's volume, but was equally of eminent importance to the current debate about the Bush administration's efforts to muster sufficient backing for a military strike against Iraq in the Security Council of the United Nations.

The eye-catching, and bitterly ironic, title of this voluminous book is borrowed from the phrase coined by Warren Christopher, then secretary of state in the Clinton administration. The book is subdivided into 14 chapters, seven of which are focused on individual country cases – namely the Holocaust, Turkey, Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda, and most recently and dramatically Kosovo. The combination of fact-based journalistic writing capacity with extensive legal and historical documentation make for a mission statement from Power about American policy paralysis in the face of genocide. In a word, Power argues that American foreign policy has committed its share of tragic errors in the face of genocide, and repeatedly failed to exercise the leadership expected of it. Richard Holbrooke, UN ambassador during the Clinton administration, and principal architect of the Dayton agreement that ended the Bosnian war, declared Power's work a 'breakthrough book'; an official seal of approval that has not only seen the volume be nominated for a variety of prestigious prizes, but also opened the doors of international recognition outside the narrow circles of academia and event reporting about war zones.

Samantha Power currently holds an academic teaching position and is executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University. While writing this magnum opus she also managed to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1999. However, her primary professional background is journalism, and she had her formative experiences in the Balkans. More

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