

BOOK PROPOSAL

# Boredom, Colonialism and War: Dreams of Power and Agency

Jorg Kustermans & Erik Ringmar

While relations between modern societies are becoming ever-more peaceful, their inhabitants are becoming ever-more fascinated with violence and war. The connection here, we suggest, goes via the boredom which life in modern society induces. It is our boredom which forces us to constantly look for new forms of excitement, of which violence and warfare are particularly powerful kinds.

This proposal provides a first outline of this general argument, a brief introduction of the case studies, and some additional details about the book. The chapter on "War as Cure" (enclosed) further develops some of the main points.

## *war, boredom and modernity*

One of the greatest hope of globalization concerned world peace. Markets were to bring people together in pacific intercourse; if nothing else, growing prosperity was to bring about rising levels of satisfaction and, accordingly, do away with the need to do harm onto others. Unfortunately, this dream has not come true. Violence is still prevalent and there is, it seems, a dark side to globalization (Devetak and Hughes 2008; Barkawi 2005). In world politics this is epitomized by the 9/11 attacks on New York and by the subsequent American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Globalization is not only compatible with, but it can also produce, wars. As a result, the greatest liberal hope has been dashed.

Interestingly, the same disappointment has occurred before. Witness the "first era of globalization" in the nineteenth-century, when rising prosperity and free trade were unable to prevent the First and the Second World Wars. Indeed, according to some, it was liberal principle of *laissez faire* which brought the wars

about (Polanyi 2001). But why is liberalism unable to account for the violence which persists in modern society? Why are liberalism's hopes constantly frustrated? Of the many answers to these questions, traditional IR scholars have emphasized the systemic, anarchical, features world politics (Carr 1964). However, as we argue in this book, cultural factors — systems of meaning — may also play a role. Cultural systems too can predispose a society to engage, or not engage, in violent actions. A society, a modern society, can be characterized by a certain *public mood*, a widely shared emotional predisposition, which makes it more or less war-prone (Lebow 2008; Dallek 1982).

As we argue, there is a fundamental tension at the heart of modern society. On the one hand, people are increasingly empowered and materially well-off. They share in the belief that progress is possible so long as they remain cheerfully engaged in their various daily activities. On the other hand, many people are profoundly dissatisfied with their lives. Above all, as psychologists, sociologists and fiction writers have affirmed — people in modern society are easily bored (Spacks 1995; Goodstein 2005; Svendsen 2005). We are bored when things fail to grab and hold our attention, or when there is nothing that engages and interests us. People who easily are bored are constantly looking for new things to entertain them. This relentless search for the new is one of the defining features of modernity.

What we have are thus two different stories of modern society. A liberal, progressive, account which sees society as becoming increasingly rational, efficient and peaceful, and a revisionist account, skeptical of liberalism and progress, which sees improvements as accidental and wars as an ever-present threat. Accompanying these stories are two different accounts of modern men and women. In the liberal story, we are cheerfully active; the enthusiastic makers of our own destinies. In the skeptical account, we are passive and easily bored, constantly

looking for things that can revive our spirits.

One of the most powerful forms of entertainment is violence. Violence has a unique ability to alleviate boredom by restoring a sense of agency. Warriors are heroes, in charge of their lives; warriors are men of action — and they are never bored. Risking our own lives, and imperiling the lives of others, in a virtual environment if not in an actual, is both exciting and addictive (Coker 2004; DerDerian 2009). The more modern our societies become, the more peaceful, but in the process the more bored its inhabitants. People who are bored often dream dreams of empowerment through violence. This explains the ever greater fascination with warfare.

### *case studies: warfare and colonialism*

Slightly differently put, although boredom has several causes, it can successfully be cured through dreams concerning the restoration of agency. If we only can be convinced that our actions matter, the world will once again appear interesting to us. Such re-engagement is best achieved by means of a convincing story. A story necessarily presents itself to its audience as worthy of their attention (Spacks, 1995). By following the plot we become engaged in the lives of the characters portrayed as their actions move the story forward. If these stories concern ourselves, the narrative helps to give sense and direction to our lives. We become the heroes of the stories we tell, or which are told, about us. In modern societies, such stories have been presented in relation to a number of different fields of action, of which the empirical chapters in our book will discuss two: *warfare* and *colonialism*.

During the first era of globalization, in the decades before World War I, a feeling of malaise quickly spread across Europe as different writers complained of a widespread existential meaninglessness (Stromberg 1982; Howard 2001). Many of

them hoped that a new war would change passivity into activity and turn the soft, bourgeois, aesthetes into "real men." When the war eventually came in 1914, soldiers all over Europe, marched off, usually very enthusiastically, to the front-lines. In explaining this reaction, this chapter pays particular attention to William James' essay "On the Moral Equivalent of War," 1906, and Agathon's purportedly empirical study of the mood among young French people on the eve of the Great War (Agathon 1913; James 1906). The vast literature on the outbreak of World War I is also relevant here to the extent that it sees war as a solution to the problem of passivity and boredom (Graves 2000; Mosse 1986; Zweig 1964; Lebow 2008).

Our second case study concerns colonialism. For many people who lacked opportunities in Europe, "the colonies" held out a hope of a restoration of their energies. The colonies were seen a perfect setting for re-empowering action: for some people to exploit, often ruthlessly, and for others to use for good works — as missionaries or as doctors. The perceived passivity of the locals served to dramatize the active nature of the Europeans. Conversely, leading politicians regarded colonialism as a "safety valve," a channel into which socially disruptive behavior safely could be diverted. Case studies here are Richard Burton, Cecil Rhodes, Lawrence of Arabia, "Chinese Gordon" as well as Christian missionaries and Joseph Conrad's Mr. Kurtz (Boulger 1911; Jourdan 1911; Thomas 1925; Brodie 1984; Cavert 1917; Watt 1981). In the American context, the expanding western frontier — "go west, young man!" — served the same purpose, allowing factory-workers in the large cities in the East to dream dreams of empowering action in the West. This particular colonial fantasy provided one of the most powerful mythologies of the twentieth century (Turner 1961).

These conclusions will help us analyze contemporary international politics. The attempts to restore a sense agency during "first era of globalization" allow us to

understand the attempts to restore agency during the “second era of globalization.” Today, as before, people are bored and in constant search of excitement. Today too there is a widespread fascination with violence — as expressed for example in movies, television, and video-games (Coker 2004; DerDerian 2009). In some ways, death is our last taboo. In our contemporary societies, people who are bored and powerless are, just like 100 years ago, fascinated with the regenerative powers of warfare (Coker 2009; Lebow 2008). This might not explain why they go to war, or why wars occur, but it does produce a certain public mood — a systemic cultural factor — which can explain why some kinds of violent actions become more likely.

### *implications for IR research*

Our historical case studies have several implications for the study of international relations. A first contribution concerns the causes of war and the condition of peace. By foregrounding the importance of shared emotions and “moods” which decision-makers can tap into when preparing for and executing war, (Rahn, Kroeger, and Kite 1996; Geva and Skorick 2006; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Scheff 1994), we are forced to rethink the “three images of war” which Waltz, in his classical work (Waltz 1959; Lebow 2008), urged scholars to use when explaining warfare. This is particularly the case for the first image — of “man,” a being which in Waltz’ analysis is treated as an a-cultural and a-historical atom.

As for the conditions of peace, our hypotheses connect to the research on democratic peace. Rather than focusing on regime type, however, we stress the importance of societal types and cultural systems of meaning (Macmillan 1996; Gat 2005; Russett 1993) If modern, democratic, societies are intrinsically fascinated by violence, this surely qualifies their alleged peace-proneness (Geis, Lothar Brock, and Harald Muller 2007).

With respect to colonialism, we hope to add to our understanding of the

"psychology of colonialism" (Gendzier 1976; Mannoni 1991). The question of agency is central in post-colonial theory and in its application to security studies (Barkawi and Laffey 2006), but here it deals predominantly with the empowering and disempowering consequences of colonialism. We will add to these insights by inquiring into the cultural bases of the discourse of activity and passivity in the colonial power itself. Rather than seeing the colonial administrators as active agents who invade and dominate a colony, we see them as passive, and themselves dominated, subjects who are looking for ways to revitalize their spirits. This does not invalidate a traditional post-colonial reading, but it does deepen, and complicate, it.

A final contribution concerns the status of dreams as an object of activity. Boredom, we said, can be alleviated through real experiences but also through vicarious ones. Indeed, for the vast majority of people, vicarious experiences are always going to be more important. After all, not everyone is destined to become a real-life hero. There is a rhetoric of agency and empowerment which serves to convince people that they really have more options than they do. In addition, as twentieth-century history has shown, dreams of the restoration of agency often end up as nightmares. And in the end, as many of the erstwhile heroes came to realize, war is actually surprisingly boring, and so were most of the positions in the colonial empires (Russell 2005; Ender; Conner 2007; Auerbach 2005). Dreams of power and agency, like all officially sanctioned myths, are ways to manipulate people and order social life.

### *time schedule*

We plan to begin research for the book during the autumn of 2010. We should be able to have a complete manuscript ready by the end of 2012.

### *audience*

The book is intended primarily for academics and advanced students in the field of international relations, but it should also be of interest to students in sociology and cultural studies. We have a good record of writing accessible prose without “dumbing down” the material. Several of our previous publications are currently used in courses at leading universities around the world.

### *competing titles*

There are plenty of books on boredom, disempowerment, war and colonialism, but none to our knowledge which combines these themes. Our aim is to present a new set of questions to the IR community, and to open up a new field of research.

### *the authors*

Jorg Kustermans is a PhD researcher at the Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Belgium. His dissertation research is concerned with questions of war and peace, and the issue of agency in world politics and social theory.

Erik Ringmar is professor of Social and Cultural Studies at NCTU, Xinzhu, Taiwan. He has a PhD in political science from Yale University, taught at LSE in London for 12 years, and has published books with Cambridge UP, Routledge, Paradigm Publishers, and others. He is a faculty fellow at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology.

### *references*

- Agathon. 1913. *Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui: le goût de l'action, la foi patriotique, une renaissance catholique, le réalisme politique*. Paris: Plon.  
<http://www.archive.org/details/lesjeunesgensdau00tarduoft>.
- Auerbach, Jeffrey A. 2005. Imperial Boredom. *Common Knowledge* 11, no. 2: 283-305.

- Barkawi, Tarak. 2005. *Globalization and War*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., July 28.
- Barkawi, Tarak, and Mark Laffey. 2006. The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies. *Review of International Studies* 32: 329-352.
- Boulger, Demetrius C. 1911. *The Life of Gordon, Major-General, R.E.C.b.* London: T.F. Unwin. <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofgordonmajo00bouluoft>.
- Brodie, Fawn McKay. 1984. *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, July 17.
- Carr, Edward Hallett. 1964. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. New York: Harper Torch books.
- Cavert, Samuel McCrea. 1917. The Missionary Enterprise as the Moral Equivalent of War. *The Biblical World* 50, no. 6 (December): 348-352.
- Coker, Christopher. 2004. *The Future of War: The Re-Enchantment of War in the Twenty-First Century*. Wiley-Blackwell, November 5.
- . 2009. *War in an Age of Risk*. Polity, March 3.
- Conner, Seth A. 2007. *Boredom by Day, Death by Night: An Iraq War Journal*. Tripping Light Press, August 17.
- Dallek, Robert. 1982. National Mood and American Foreign Policy: A Suggestive Essay. *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Autumn): 339-361.
- DerDerian, James. 2009. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, February 5.
- Devetak, Richard, and Christopher W. Hughes. 2008. *The Globalization of Political Violence: Globalization's Shadow*. London: Routledge, April 7.
- Ender, Morten G. Boredom, Iraq, and U.S. Soldiers. United States Military Academy. [http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/0/3/4/8/3/pages34833/p34833-1.php](http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/3/4/8/3/pages34833/p34833-1.php).
- Gat, Azar. 2005. The Democratic Peace Theory Reframed: The Impact of Modernity. *World Politics* 58, no. 1: 73-100. doi:10.1353/wp.2006.0017.
- Geis, Anna, Lothar Brock, and Harald Muller. 2007. Democratic Wars: Looking at the Dark Side of the Democratic Peace. *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 5 (9): 637-638.
- Gendzier, Irene L. 1976. Psychology and Colonialism: Some Observations. *Middle East Journal* 30, no. 4 (Autumn): 501-515.
- Goodstein, Elizabeth. 2005. *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, January 15.
- Graves, Robert. 2000. *Goodbye to All That*. 1929th ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, September 28.
- Howard, Michael. 2001. *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order*. New Haven: Yale University Press, March 1.
- James, William. 1906. The Moral Equivalent of War. *Wikisource* Speech given at Stanford. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Moral\\_Equivalent\\_of\\_War](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Moral_Equivalent_of_War).
- Jourdan, Philip. 1911. *Cecil Rhodes, His Private Life*. London: John Lane. <http://www.archive.org/details/cecilrhodeshispr00journala>.

- Lebow, Richard Ned. 2008. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press, December 11.
- Macmillan, John. 1996. Democracies Don't Fight: A Case of the Wrong Research Agenda? *Review of International Studies* 22, no. 3 (July): 275-299.
- Mannoni, Octave. 1991. *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*. 1st ed. University of Michigan Press, January 15.
- Mosse, George L. 1986. Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience. *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 4 (October): 491-513.
- Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The Great Transformation*. 2nd ed. Beacon Press, March 28.
- Russell, A.G. 2005. The War on Troop Boredom. <http://thewarontroopboredom.com/>.
- Russett, Bruce M. 1993. *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, January 1.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. 1995. *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stromberg, Roland N. 1982. *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, March.
- Svendsen, Lars. 2005. *A Philosophy of Boredom*. London: Reaktion Books, April 15.
- Thomas, Lowell Jackson. 1925. *With Lawrence in Arabia*. London: Hutchinson. <http://www.archive.org/details/withlawrenceinar00thomuoft>.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1961. The Significance of the Frontier in American History [1893]. In *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. <http://www.archive.org/details/frontierandsecti010192mbp>.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1959. *Man, the State and War*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Watt, Ian. 1981. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. University of California Press, June 29.
- Zweig, Stefan. 1964. *The World Of Yesterday*. 1943rd ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.