

The Semantic Sliding of the Concept of War

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After the end of the Cold War, Western States have been involved in continuous conflicts all over the world. From the Persian Gulf War to Iraq, and the so-called “Humanitarian Wars”, war has again become a tool of politics, as described in Clausewitz’s paradigm.

Through a genealogy of the discourses of war produced between 1991 and 2003, the pattern that emerges shows that war has continuously been signified as just: a negative but necessary event.

Moreover, if we analyze in what way the military actions were presented during the 1991 Persian Gulf War (the first war of a new phase in the international order after 1989), we observe that there was a substantial difference between communicated war and real war. The mass media responded to a strategy aimed at conveying a clean image of war, through the choice of a language devoid of any reference to death.

A comparative analysis of the narration of the 1991 war with those produced in the early Twentieth century by the Futurist movement and the Kriegsideologie shows that during the Twentieth century the concept of war underwent a deep semantic sliding; it went from being associated with death, suffering, blood and heroism as means to rediscover the true value of life, to a clean, technological, post-heroic war, the aim of which is not to gain power or rule but to restore order and normality.

Since war has begun to include the people – the masses of civilians not “technically” fighting – it has been deeply linked with a discourse (in the foucauldian sense) aiming at total mobilization. An analysis of the discourses of war reveals the deep connection between politics and war; the discourses of war produced by the most recent conflicts expose the complex relationship between politics and public opinion, thus becoming the evidence of a latent weak spot in sectors of contemporary Western democratic systems.