

VICTOR TURNER

And the Theatre of War



IVANA TROŠELJ

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VICTOR TURNER AND THE THEATRE OF WAR

A reflection on the value of Psyops, culture and performance during conflict.



This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree of a Bachelor of Arts with Joint Honours in English, and Securities and Counterterrorism, at Murdoch University, November 2011.

Ivana Trošelj



Declaration statement

This Honours thesis is presented in the year of 2011 for the Bachelor of Arts with joint Honours in English, and Securities and Counterterrorism at Murdoch University. I declare that this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my own work and an account of my own research.

- Ivana Trošelj.

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Author: Ivana Trošelj

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ABSTRACT

Conventional ‘force-on-force’ warfare is a thing of the past (Kilcullen 2009: 292). Much has changed in the conduct of war since Carl von Clausewitz’s opus *On War* (Clausewitz 1997) was first published in 1832; the ongoing digitisation of the contemporary battlefield promises swifter and more intense battles at a lower cost-to-combat ratio (Goldenstein and Jacobowitz 1996: 10); while a rise in low-intensity and insurgent war is anticipated to continue within the developing world (McLaughlin 1989: 1-2). The only thing one may say with any certainty about the future of warfare is the diverse nature of its conduct (Black 2001: 82); and the enduringly psychological nature of all kinds of human conflict (Paddock 1996: 33).

Despite this, contemporary Western militaries continually re-enact the principles of conventional war; even where unsuited, while the psychological dimension of war is often the least appreciated and engaged (Stillwell 1996: 319), even though it is ‘human’ forces that provide conflict with its many variables (Leonhard 2000: 209-2011). A misunderstanding of these forces has resulted in a shortfall of resourcing, continuity and training for Psychological Operations (Psyops) (Paddock 1996: 34); while appreciation for the soft power of Psyops and the human elements of war have been diminished by an empirical, neo-Clausewitzian strategic framework (Van Creveld 1991: 148-149) and a particularly Western and Postmodern notion of Technological Determinism (Black 2001: 97). I believe that importing Victor Turner’s performance theory into existing military doctrines will provide a useful heuristic model for working with these problems, because of its unique perspective on the dramatic power of symbol, performance and conflict; and I believe that this will further enhance the military’s understanding and appreciation of Psyops’ unique capabilities, along with the more human elements of warfare; while supplying a much-needed process-oriented understanding of human culture and conflict at strategic level.



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INTRODUCTION

Victor Turner once said that theories only become relevant if and when they illuminate some aspect of social reality (Turner 1974: 23). I am appealing to Turner's theories on 'performance' here, in order to illuminate some aspects of armed conflict which I believe are persistently overlooked by those who plan wars; in particular those aspects which highlight the essentially 'human nature' of conflict. The focus of my research here is on the work of military Psychological Operations and the way in which Turner's processual model of social drama, and the transforming potential of liminal states, can provide a better explanatory framework for their capabilities, as well as address the need for a process-oriented theory of culture in the military at present. I have chosen to focus on the work of Psyops, because they alone deal consistently with people and perception in conflict, and because they are a unique form of non-violent conflict management practiced by the military across a wide variety of conflict scenarios, only some of which involve combat. Because of their uses in both war and in peace, they are also uniquely situated to ensure that the continuity of human knowledge gained (and usually lost) from war to war is preserved.

Like so many other impotent observers, I followed astonished, at the developments that led up to Second Gulf War, augmenting what seemed like mere sabre-rattling into one of the lengthiest and costliest wars the U.S. has ever waged. Martin Van Creveld even called it the 'most foolish war since Emperor Augustus in 9 B.C. sent his legions into Germany and lost them' (Van Creveld 2005). And yet, I was surprised to learn, this war could have been avoided: had the U.S. better understood Saddam Hussein's fears and the climate he operated in; had they only had a better understanding of Iraqi culture it was claimed; mere psychological coercion would have sufficed (Jervis 2010: 177). The U.S. campaign in Iraq was mired by a similarly deficient understanding of culture and the human dimensions of conflict, resulting in the waste of trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. I believe that Turner's theories on culture and performance may remedy this faulty brand of 'conflict management,' and I present them here with the aim of improving the way in which cultural knowledge is handled by governments and militaries at present, while offering some novel insights into the nature of soft power.

In Section 1 of this dissertation I will discuss the challenges of Psychological Operations and reference Turner to argue the importance of understanding culture and human perception during conflict. Chapter I. on ‘The Value of Psyops;’ explains the function of Psychological Operations during conflict, and the reasons for their generally poor reception and resource allocation in the armed forces. As a general rule, the lower in intensity a conflict becomes, the more likely that military campaigns will depend upon Psyops, on account of the increased dependence upon local populations in occupied territories. Yet despite the vital support they render, their funding is seldom continued at the close of a war. Chapter II. on ‘Continuity’ discusses the ‘institutional amnesia’ that results as a lack of this continuity in Psyops, as evidenced in the curricula of service schools and subsequent military campaigns, where the mistakes of history are ever being repeated. In the contemporary era, these mistakes have been further augmented by a preference for ‘bodiless’ conflicts, and swift, high-tech, precision warfare, defined by the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA). The folly of Donald Rumsfeld’s ‘speed goals’ during the 2003 Iraq invasion is an example of this faulty thinking, and a costly reminder of the enduring importance of the ‘human terrain,’ which is explained and remedied by Turner’s arguments on human perception, as discussed in chapter III., ‘RMA vs. Human Terrain’.

The U.S. Military’s eventual promotion of a new counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine during the Second Gulf War, which included the use of embedded social scientists in the controversial Human Terrain Systems (HTS), was a response to the difficulties encountered with ‘human terrain’. Chapter IV. on ‘Culture vs. HUMINT’ focuses on this development to argue the military’s status as an evolving culture in its own right, while considering the nature of the HTS controversy, and drawing upon Turner’s theories to highlight the error of treating ‘cultural’ information as a form of static intelligence; especially at the Strategic level, where a more abstract theoretical framework of thinking is needed. This is where a qualitative form of judgement and research are especially required for a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour in conflict, as provided by Turner’s de-empiricalised version of Anthropology, and this will be argued in chapter V., on ‘Qualitative Judgement and the ‘Law of Humanity,’ where the military’s on-going preference for quantitative research and ‘hard’ sciences, will also be discussed.

In Section 2 I will elaborate on the psychological dimensions of conflict, in order to introduce Turner's theories on conflict as a form of affective performance, capable of inducing altered states and generating social change, and as such, a worthy explanatory model for Psyops' persuasive powers. Section 2 begins with chapter VI.; 'War as a Performance,' and introduces the importance of a defining doctrine for the military and the idea of conflict as a form of public performance, in order to highlight the value of Turner's theories to Psyops' understanding of perception and persuasion. Chapter VII., on 'the Utility of Performance,' discusses Turner's theory of 'social drama' as a restorative response to a breach in the social order. His views on conflict mediation are supported here by insights from a number of other theorists writing on the psychological imperatives that compel people to enter war. These theorists all agree on the affective state that humans enter during conflict, and in chapter VII. on 'Liminal Moments,' this altered state of reality is further discussed within the scope of Turner's work on 'liminality'—ambiguous moments, induced via ritual and performance, during which symbols and meanings; social order, may be subverted and transformed. The nature of this transforming 'soft power,' inherent to all 'performance,' 'ritual' and 'social drama' will be summarised in chapter VIII., 'Dramatic Possibilities'.

In Section 3, I will discuss Turner's performance theory within the context of the Second Gulf War, beginning with a recapitulation of Turner's ideas in chapter X., on the 'Second Gulf War performance,' where I present evidence of the performative, symbolic and ritualistic to support Turner's theory on the universality of 'performance,' while Chapter XI, on 'The Importance of Strategy and Doctrine' explains the importance of military doctrine; the way in which Turner's theories can provide a much needed heuristic model at doctrinal level, and the ways in which doctrine, strategy and intelligence may also be misinterpreted, despite the sound intentions and intelligence of those who promote them. The final chapter, XII., 'Turner's Liminal Legacy – a final thought on 'immersion,' reconsiders the importance of properly engaging with human behavior and culture during conflict, and argues for more extensive engagement with the military on the part of the 'soft' sciences, while recalling Turner's comments on the ineffable nature of the 'liminal,' an aspect of human behaviour which he claimed could only properly be studied by immersing oneself in the experience.

These claims will seem odd no doubt, for those who recall that Turner was a pacifist and a non-combatant during World War Two. But if Turner's views on a 'unified science' of human behavior are to be respected as he requested, via the unification of numerous disciplines, and via the traversing of researchers into untraditional and uncomfortable territories, then an immersive study of conflict cannot be avoided, and there is still a case to be made in favour of academia's engagement with the contemporary military; which itself is poised at a liminal, or transforming moment of sorts. It may be well to reflect here on the fact that one of the fundamental causes of intelligence errors for countries is that that they see the world and each other differently (Jervis 2010: 177). As I previously mentioned, it has been claimed that the Second Gulf War might have been altogether avoided with a better grasp of culture and conflict process at strategic levels of decision making. In the absence of these, the U.S. failed to properly understand and communicate with its adversaries. I believe that the engagement of academics with both government and military will remedy this by exposing strategic decision making processes to the kind of cultural thinking which has clearly been lacking, not just in war, but in peacetime; while importing elements of Turner's theories on culture and conflict into existing military doctrines will provide a more detailed heuristic model for conflict processes, and help to avoid such costly and tragic mistakes in the future.

