

Comment on Roy Carr-Hill's Paper

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Introduction

Roy Carr-Hill's initiative in carrying out an independent survey of public opinion before the 2003 Iraq War has yielded some very interesting results that are ably discussed in his report in this issue. We had written a joint report on our research into opinion during the Gulf War (Shaw and Carr-Hill, 1991), which forms the background to the new work, and I was very pleased to have an input into the 2003 survey. In this comment, I explore selected areas of the results.

Military involvement and attitudes

It is striking that the survey re-validates the significance of the distinctive sociological assumption about what Carr-Hill, following our 1991 study, calls 'warrior status' - although I am now inclined to rename this 'military participation status' or 'military involvement'. The hypothesis, following the literature on the implications of military (Andreski, 1968) and wartime (Marwick 1984) participation for social change, was that participation in military organizations was likely to be associated with greater willingness to support military action. However, military participation had greatly narrowed from the days of total war and peacetime conscription (van Doorn, 1975). (In 1991, this trend was much more marked in Britain compared to Continental Europe where conscription continued; now the difference is less).

Our 1991 study showed that, taking into account familial as well as personal involvement with the military, there was still a fairly large minority of the population who were affected and that their attitudes differed significantly from non-involved. The present study shows a smaller proportion of involved - one would expect this as 'historic warriors' are now aging (the youngest WWII veterans are 75+ and the last National Servicemen has turned 60) and Britain's armed forces have shrunk further - from over 300,000 to just over 200,000 in the last decade. However, it also shows the continuing significance for attitudes of the social distinction with military involved and non-involved, although this is framed by a much more anti-war general balance of opinion in 2003, compared to 1991.

Perceiving risk in war

Second, the survey suggests the contradictory significance of perceptions of risk for attitudes to modern warfare. Although military involved are more pro-war than non-involved, the latter too may be 'sold' distant

wars of the kind that Western governments fight today, precisely because they face little direct threat. Yet, contrary to suggestions that war had become a spectator sport (Mann, 1988), we showed (Shaw and Carr-Hill, 1991) that a largely pro-war population still expressed fairly strong personal anxieties and many perceived the threats to the lives of others in a war situation.

The intriguing questions raised by the present survey, in the context of much more anti-war public opinion, concern the shifts in concern about different kinds of potential victims. Is the increased concern registered for Iraqi civilians, compared to 1991, a cause or a consequence of the anti-war environment? Does it reflect this particular conjuncture, or a secular trend towards greater sensitivity towards civilian victims, the product of a decade of 'new' wars and human rights and NGO campaigning? These are questions for further research.

Political risk and life risk

I have suggested that contemporary Western warfare involves a kind of 'risk-transfer militarism' (Shaw, 2002), in which life-risks are systematically transferred from Western troops not only to the armed enemy, obviously, but also to local allies, and even more to civilian populations, but as much through indirect harm as through direct attack. These transfers are mediated by the representations of civilian deaths as 'unintended' and 'accidental'. The combination of minimised harm to Western forces combined with indirect, media-neutralised harm to civilians, in turn facilitates the minimising of political risks for the leaders who fight wars synchronised with electoral cycles.

And yet these transfers open up leaders to various kinds of 'risk rebound'. It was obvious at the time of the survey, and has become more certain since, that US and British war leaders did not have these processes under complete control. George W Bush, having launched the new permanent ideological campaign of the 'War on Terrorism' following 9/11, had made huge short-term political gains and it was in this context that he launched his Iraq campaign. In the build-up to war, it paid off handsomely in the mid-term elections. However, even in the USA, public opinion has shown considerable strains as the uncertainties of the post-war Iraq situation have ramified and especially as the steady drip of US casualties has shown few signs of abating.

In Britain, of course, Tony Blair - whose whole motivation has been largely to keep onside with Bush - has suffered enormous damage from pursuing war against the grain of public, party and even Government opinion. This seems to be reflected in the survey in the fact that we have more Liberal-Democrat than Labour intending voters - partly an artefact

of the localities chosen, but also representing a trend demonstrated in the September 2003 by-election (lost by Labour to the Lib-Dems) in Brent East, intriguingly close geographically and sociologically to the Ealing section of the survey. It seems likely that the explanation of the political paradoxes over attitudes to the war, to which Roy refers, is that many formerly Labour but anti-war identifiers had, in the survey, switched allegiance to the Lib-Dems or Greens.

What is less clear, however, is how far this undoubted political risk to Blair has been correlated with the life-risks of those on the ground in Iraq. The loss of 50+ British soldiers - although many of these have been in accidents or 'friendly fire' incidents - has not contributed very obviously to Blair's crisis, as political critics have generally refrained from making a direct connection. The much more substantial harm to some Iraqis - 10,000 civilians may have died more or less directly from the war, and larger numbers have been injured - has equally played a limited role. Blair's unpopularity seems due more to the *way* the war was promoted - hence the continuing damage from the David Kelly affair - and the lack of international legitimacy, than to what is actually happening in Iraq.

So while people are undoubtedly aware in general of the risks to life, there is not much evidence (post-war, rather than in the survey) of an *active* interest in Iraqi events. Those who are anti-war are not necessarily following events in Iraq closely or concerned about what is happening to people there. Indeed, the anti-war movement, which at the level of a simple negative to the war was extraordinarily successful in mobilising opinion, has also had difficulties in engaging with the post-war situation, which is too complex to admit of a single slogan to compare with 'Stop the War'. Hence the organisers of a London protest on 27 September 2003 originally advertised their march with the simple slogan 'Iraq demo', only later issuing 'End the Occupation' posters - as though they had difficulty deciding what was an appropriate response. If the anti-war *movement* represented a very diverse range of groups, how much more heterogenous was anti-war *opinion*.

Contradictions of Muslim opinion

The case of Muslim opinion represents these contradictions in a particular way. Although 'Muslim' is primarily a religious identification, as treated in the survey, British 'Muslims' have become organised as such - rather than according to their diverse national and cultural origins in South Asia and elsewhere - primarily through political action. The early 1990s were a critical stage in this process, as the Salman Rushdie affair was followed quickly by the Gulf War. In the latter case, it was clear that British Muslim opinion reflected grievances about the

situation of Muslims in British society, as much as specific concerns about the Gulf War. 'Muslim' opposition to the war was often an abstract, rather generalised position, hence many British Muslims' obliviousness to Saddam Hussein's brutal repressions of Shi'ites and Kurds in the aftermath of the war. Like many other Muslims outside Iraq, many (especially younger) British Muslims identified with Saddam and didn't pay too much attention to the manner of his rule (Shaw, 1996: 67-69).

The present survey highlights similar contradictions. Certainly, a large proportion of Muslims did recognise Saddam as either 'dangerous' or 'oppressive' - descriptions that, unlike the more problematic 'mad' or 'like Hitler', are surely fairly accurate. Many also opposed *both* US attacks on Iraq *and* Saddam's attacks on 'ordinary Muslims inside Iraq'. However, the much smaller proportions of Muslims (than of the general population) acknowledging Saddam as dangerous or oppressive could represent a kind of perverse reaction to the general British political and media demonisation of Saddam. Likewise, the support for 'Islamic militants fighting the West' as well as actually for Saddam, stronger (combined) than those who opted to support the Iraqi opposition to Saddam, suggests that many Muslims were seeing the war through in generalised Islamist political terms rather than responding to the actual situation in Iraq. This Islamism is presumably the counterpart of Bush's own anti-terrorism, at least in part the consequence of the polarisation that war brings.

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