Emergent Conflict and Peaceful Change
by Hugh Miall, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 206 pp.

Peter Ryley

Miall's subject is 'emergent conflict' i.e. conflict resulting from social change. The book tries to analyse why some changes lead to violence and others do not and seeks to find ways in which change can be managed peacefully. Emergent conflict is a dynamic process through which material and cultural division assumes the form of violent conflict as small changes ignite processes of polarisation, threat and escalation, and the struggle for power.

The author uses game theory and systems theory to understand emerging conflict. This is most effective when he uses quantitative analysis to identify the factors that prevent war. Prosperity and democracy appear to be real 'preventors of war,' at least with other democracies. Stable governance, human rights, economic development, international organisations, and 'security communities' all inhibit the incidence of war. All contribute to what he refers to as the 'liberal peace.' In the light of current events, one proposition in particular leaps out at the reader. Miall asserts that there is a high probability of civil conflict associated with what he calls 'anocracies'; '... countries which have a transitional form of government between autocracy and democracy ... are more prone to civil wars than established democracies or autocracies' (pp. 112-13). How one wishes that this observation had been uppermost in the minds of the planners of the post-war settlement in Iraq.

But Miall's rational choice approach often results in a somewhat reductionist approach. Take this example.

> For example, in the case of trench warfare of 1914-18, the German and French soldiers who refrained from shooting at one another or deliberately shot wide may have seen each other as members of a temporary group constituted by being together in a similar predicament in the trenches. The soldiers on each side shared an interest in avoiding attacks on the other, since this would bring down attacks on themselves. (pp. 72-3)

More likely, the soldiers saw themselves as members of a permanent group – humanity – and were wrestling with their moral consciences in the midst of horror,

rather than calculating a rational exchange.

Though Miall does acknowledge the complexity of human motivation, by seeking the 'root causes' of conflict in rational material interests he flirts with apologism. He certainly seems to have seems to have ingested the relativism of some of the anti-war activists and their abandonment of liberal values. Though he has engaged with the work of the research community, Miall has not considered the arguments of the anti-totalitarian left. He writes:

> With the Copenhagen conditions for accession, and the promotion of EU models of human rights and governance, Europe became an active centre for the further consolidation and expansion of 'the liberal peace.' Yet this came at a cost. The intrusion of Western democratic models and market conditionality into Eastern Europe proved disastrous in the case of the former Yugoslavia, and the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo were a searing reverse. (p. 109)

Here, EU concepts of human rights rather than Serb imperialism caused genocide in the Balkans. Elsewhere, preposterously, the propaganda ploys of anti-western authoritarians are lauded as models of peaceful engagement. Miall praises a 1998 call by the then Iranian president Khatami for a Culture of Dialogue, based on knowledge about others, tolerance, and respect. Khatami, of course, headed a regime that denied women even the most basic equalities, persecuted homosexuals, tortured and executed its opponents, and which had a deep-rooted anti-Semitism at the heart of its ideology.

At the height of the Cold War, the radical U.S. sociologist C. Wright Mills developed a critique of what he called 'crackpot realism.' His argument was that the apparently hard-headed realism of military planners and politicians was, in fact, quite insane and based on their own inability to understand the complexity of conflict. War was the great intellectual simplifier and an alternative to the altogether more tricky activity of thought. No one could accuse Miall of avoiding complexity but he flirts with that 'crackpot pacifism' of our times that ignores oppression, excuses violence, and seeks to rationalise away genuine threats through wishful thinking.

Miall's book is about the dynamics of peaceful conflict resolution as a necessary part of social change. He offers sobering and valuable critiques of both the prevailing 'liberal peace' as 'a peace at home combined with an easy willingness to use armed force abroad, a peace that protects the prosperity of millions of people

at the expense of the destitution of other millions' (p. 111) and of the careless and rushed promotion of democracy-reduced-to-elections, which, 'outside the borders of the liberal peace,' can be a 'stimulus to wars' (p. 108). However valuable these insights are, 'emergent conflict' can also throw up pathological movements with a worship of violence and a desire for war that is impervious to reason. Whilst peaceful political and social engagement and institution building can undermine the support for such movements, it may still be necessary to fight them. Miall is to be commended in his attempt to find alternatives to the undoubted horrors of modern warfare. He is surely right when he concludes, 'Peaceful change is possible … in the context of an emancipatory world politics' (p. 174). But an emancipatory politics may not be always be able to avoid the projection of force.

Peter Ryley works in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Hull and blogs at Fat Man On A Keyboard.