



ICS SEMINAR SERIES

The 'Dangerous Concept of the Just War': Third Worldism and the Laws of War

JESSICA WHYTE

DATE

Thursday 8 September

TIME

11.30am – 1pm

VENUE

EE.G.36, Parramatta Campus (South)

NEXT SEMINAR

15 September

Astrida Neimanis

Water as a Planetary Archive of Feeling

Please check

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ABSTRACT

In the late twentieth century, the language of 'just war' left the theology departments of Catholic universities and entered the mainstream of public debate about war. For Michael Walzer, this 'triumph of Just War theory' is a sign of moral progress through which moral theory has been incorporated into military strategy and serves as a real constraint on the fighting of wars. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, this revival of just war rhetoric has only intensified: President Obama's aides explain that the US President takes a direct involvement in approving 'kill lists' for drone strikes in Pakistan, because, as 'a student of writings on war by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, he believes that he should take moral responsibility for such actions'. US military lawyers refer explicitly to Aquinas in justifying so-called 'collateral damage'. And scientists funded by the US army to research autonomous lethal robots are working on prototypes for an 'ethical control and reasoning system' which would embed the principles of just war theory into the design of these killer machines. In this paper, I challenge Walzer's progressive narrative by turning to the often-acrimonious debates about just and unjust wars during the drafting of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions. I show that during the 1974 'Diplomatic Conference on the Laws of War' it was the Third World and Soviet states that used the language of the 'just war' to distinguish wars of national liberation from wars of 'imperialist aggression'—particularly the US War in Vietnam. In stark contrast, the Western states, including the US, attacked the language of just war as a medieval licence to cruelty. I argue that it was not moral progress, but only the defeat of Third Worldism that made it possible to revive the language of 'just war' for a new form of empire.

BIOGRAPHY

Jessica Whyte is Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Social Analysis at Western Sydney University, Australia, an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow and a member of the Institute for Culture and Society. Her research interests include the history and theory of human rights, sovereignty, and contemporary European philosophy, particularly Agamben and Foucault. Her work has been published in a range of fora including *Law and Critique*; *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*; *Theory and Event*; and *Contemporary Political Theory*. Her book *Governing Homo Economicus: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* will be published by Verso in 2017. She is currently working on an Australian Research Council DECRA project: 'Inventing Collateral Damage: The Changing Moral Economy of War'.