

Interview with
Catherine Hass

War Today

[Aujourd'hui la guerre]

This interview was carried out by AOC
in partnership with the French Institute (Paris)

Catherine Hass, Aujourd'hui la guerre
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Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

My starting point coincides with the early stages of that change, between the late 1990s – the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 – and October 2001, when the United States initiated its “global war on terror”. I emphasise the global dimension because it is on a global level that the word’s meaning was transformed: from that point on, the word war was indiscriminately applied to both domestic and foreign affairs, freed of any temporal or spatial limits. This era saw a radical reorganisation of the seminal dichotomies defining the notion of war – domestic and foreign, civil and military, police and defence, war and peace, friend and enemy. This new configuration did not however lead to a reappraisal of the word war in the humanities, but rather to a sort of consensus on its object: a structural phenomenon of globalisation, war lost its significance and became just one among many forms of violence. The book’s origins thus lie at the crossroads between a political and academic context specific to the 2000s, and led me to the following conviction: the significance of the word war has to be maintained and studied, and its current properties need to be determined. Neglecting to do so bears far too heavy consequences for contemporary thought.

What was your writing process?

Conducting a study implies choosing a given methodology. In this case, inquiring into the politics of war requires us to consider war differently. We can no longer read it through the lens of a given venerable concept or general theory, but rather through that of the politics at play in a given sequence of wars. I gradually came upon this free and experimental – and thus, innovative – anthropological approach, during the writing of my dissertation, because this field formed the foundations of my PhD. The offer to publish was almost instantaneous: I happened to defend my thesis one week after the 13th of November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. Its apparently obscure title, *An Enquiry into the Word War* [Une enquête sur le nom de guerre], came sharply into focus with the suddenly ubiquitous use of the word war, becoming a crucial issue in political debate. Because my methodology was so readily adaptable to the study of the contemporary, I updated the book in light of the events that unfolded after the 2015 attacks. For publication I improved the flow of my dissertation, however its contents – aside from some methodological explanations – remained the same.

Working in the social sciences also means participating in debates in which your role as a researcher is to challenge prejudice. What is a major misconception that you would like to see challenged?

When, in 2015, François Hollande declared “We are at war”, war studies specialists cited scientific sources to prove that he was mistaken. If, from a scientific standpoint, they were right, from a political one they were wrong. It is true that this use of the word, at that juncture, marked a major shift, and that such changes were difficult to grasp at the time. But if we cannot keep up with current change, we quickly

become out of touch. Science's blind spot is thus sometimes... science itself, when, stuck on its own path, it only asserts what it already knows. However, we cannot always measure the unknown with the known, the new with the old, and knowledge sometimes lies on shifting ground.