On War on Board
– Some Reflections

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Is war natural?

In this book we have met many and varied examples of warfare at sea. A question underlying all studies dealing with war is of course why we are fighting each other at all. Can war be explained or at least understood?

Aggression as such is sometimes seen as a part of very old psychological and biological abilities for dealing with threats and danger, behaviour which we are said to share with our primate relatives (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1993, 1998). But a simple biological explanation for war soon runs into trouble, for solving problems with violence is not always the natural choice among different kind of today’s living primates, so what kind of “monkeys” the early hominids really were is debatable (see Berg & Douglas 2015).

An old question in many studies of war, whether articulated or not, is the question of a certain human nature. Some explanations claim that war and violence result from egotistical hostility that is fundamental to humans. The 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbs wrote in his famous book Leviathan from 1651, that man’s natural state was “a war of every man against every man”. To handle and control this embodied danger is, according to Hobbs, necessary and that is the task for a state and a ruler (Hobbs 1976, see also for example Dawson 1996; Malesivic 2010).

Following Hobb’s theme of man’s natural violence, culture and civilization can be seen as a way of avoiding conflict. In such a perspective it has been argued that the Enlightenment and general cultural development during the Modern period have actually made the world more peaceful. A modern best-selling book arguing for such a perspective is Steven Pinker’s The Better Angels of Our Nature (2011).

However, there have been and still are other views regarding human nature. A classic example is found in the writing of Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1712–1778). His view was the opposite to that of Hobbs. Rousseau claimed that it was in fact civilization which debased people and made them evil. In our original, natural state we humans were actually benign and innocent.
An interesting example of a way of avoiding any idea of fixed, ‘hard-wired’ character traits but still argue that humans are not born violent, is found in the Russian aristocrat, scientist and anarchist Pjotr Kropotkin’s book *Mutual Aid* from 1902. He argues there that, typical for humans (and other species), is a fundamental instinct for cooperation. The ability to work together and to help your neighbour is according to Kropotkin, the most important factor for survival. That, he maintains, is the actual core factor in evolution, not the competition between individuals that Charles Darwin had observed on the small islands of the Galapagos. Pjotr Kropotkin based his idea originally on extensive fieldwork in Siberia. In this harsh environment, animals well as humans had to cooperate and care about each other if they wanted to survive. To kill fellow humans in battles and war is from this perspective, something very odd and in opposition to the empathic and helpful nature evolution has equipped us with for mutual human survival. We therefore actually dislike fighting and conflict (Kropotkin 2012, see also Dawson 1996: 11, Berg 2012:320–21).

Explaining war?

If one does not want to explain war simply as inevitable given the fixed, aggressive and predatory nature of humans, the explanation for actual warfare must be found somewhere else outside the human mind.

Following this line, war has sometimes been explained as a simple response to social stress caused by ecological factors, lack of food or overpopulation. A well-known argument of this kind was set out by Robert Malthus (1776–1834) in “An Essay on the Principle of Population”.

Using archaeological data as a way of analysing warfare in a long-term perspective, some authors have seen it as part of cultural change and social evolution, claiming that the first evidence for warfare can be found far back in Palaeolithic times, probably in connection with more advanced tool technologies for hunting (Dawson 1996:26ff).

More common however, is to link the first systematic warfare to the late Stone Age. During the Neolithic period, people became increasingly sedentary and accumulated more possessions. The ability to accumulate surplus in various forms led to the possibility of appropriating such surpluses from one’s neighbours, leading to new forms of organized conflict. Step by step over time humans got more and more “entangled” with their possessions and with the tools they needed to obtain and protect then (see Hodder 2012, Hagberg & Widman 2016, Adams & Rönnby this volume). From military
contexts, well-known ideological constructions such as “honour, glory and duty” could also have arisen in connection to both raiding and defence as a new self-reinforcing part of this material entanglement.

The fact that wars often concern women, or in any case claims to do so, can also be explained by this perspective. In a hierarchical patriarchal society, women also become commodities that need both protection and can be conquered. The classic example is, of course, Homer’s *Iliad* (see Kallifatides 2018).

Arguing this way is rather close to a classic Marxist explanation of history, i.e., conflict resulting from material surplus in society. What classic historical materialism adds is the concept of class struggle and also an idea of law-based dialectical evolutionary change (see, for example, Wigforss 1970, Cohen 2001).

As a comprehensive answer to why we fight, there are attractions in models that stress conflict in relation to possessions and surplus. One then does not have to link the explanations to a predestined, good or bad, human nature. If war can be explained by the distribution and inequality of wealth and things, it is also possible to do something about it! A fairer world would mean less war.

A general explanation like this is of course however a simplification and it hardly makes a participant in, or a researcher of a specific war, much the wiser about the particular circumstances or causes. General models of human behaviour are helpful and worth considering but they remain just that: models, and should not be confused with the complexity and unpredictability of real life.

The historian Alf Johansson has similarly warned against seeking simple monocausal explanations for modern wars. War is, according to him, a multidimensional phenomenon. It includes for example psychology and human aspiration but also international politics and economic structures (Johansson 1988: 370ff).

The interest in war

Coming close to the end of another book dealing with war it seems relevant to reflect on where the great interest in the subject comes from. A common rationale and justification for the interest in and the importance of war studies respectively is to simply state that it is a human phenomenon that has always existed, and which has had a great influence on individuals as well as collectives for thousands of years. Written history and of course the
archaeological record (liberally scattered with evidence of contested land divisions, fortifications, weapon technologies and traces of battles back to early Stone Age) makes it difficult to contradict this.

However, if one scrutinizes this closely it becomes obvious that conflict and violence are not normal conditions. Even if organizing and preparing for war both technologically, and ideologically closely follows human history, in fact battle, i.e. occasions where people actually kill each other were very rare events. The warship Mars (1564) for example, mentioned several times in this book, sinks during a war known as the Nordic Seven Years’ War (1563–1570). It is a concentrated period of warfare in Scandinavia known for bloody battles, major naval operations and great suffering for civilians. Maritime warfare and fleet actions played an important role during these years but even during this extremely tense period (see Ekman & Unger 1942: 168–191), the actual days and hours where humans were involved in direct fighting aboard ship is calculated at less than some weeks. That means that during the seven years of warfare the actual duration of all combat was less than one percent of the time.

But still, even if actual combat resulting in fatalities is rather rare, the fascination and depictions of violence and killing are visible around us all the time. The news is full of reports from wars in various places, and we meet it daily in popular stories, literature and pure entertainment. If one studies the shelves of magazines in a news agent’s store, a surprisingly large number of them deal with war in history. There seems to be an unquenchable appetite for the violent adventures of Roman legionaries, Viking warriors or the air aces of the two World Wars. And this is just the historical part of the shelf, besides these there are also a large number of popular magazines which deal with weapons, military training and mercenaries.

The war hero

Even in texts and other forms of expression that purport to be objective witness testimony or research studies, one can often sense a rather unpleasant fascination for violence and the mechanisms connected to war. Recurring themes are the life-enhancing, euphoric feeling of being close to death, the special comradeship of soldiers ("brothers in arms") and the technical ingenuity regarding the tools for killing. Not least among these sentiments is the warrior, the hero and his extraordinary qualities which enjoy a continuity through our interest in war. It is the same story regardless of whether he is called Hercules, Sigurd Fafnesbarne, Sir Lancelot,
Braveheart or Rambo. The fact that the hero is often pictured as a complicated person just reinforces the status. Not just a super warrior, but a human super warrior in whom we can recognize ourselves (see for example Rathsack 2009, Kyhle 2015).

The image of the hero is also obviously very much linked to masculinity. Svetlana Aleksijevit’s highlights the phenomenon in her book about Soviet female fighters during WWII. They were first hailed as heroes and were celebrated for their extraordinary achievements as snipers or fighter pilots, yet after the war they became invisible and were forgotten. They themselves also preferred to hide their stories and their decorations when they returned home. What they had done and had been during the war did not fit with the norms of society at that time. A female war hero was greeted not with gratitude or admiration but with hostility and suspicion, not least by fellow women (Aleksijevits 2012).

During early modern times, masculinity of the male war hero was expressed both by attributes and clothes (see Stadin in this volume) but it is also woven into the societal regulations about how to behave and into general attitudes regarding being a brave man or being a coward. The importance of behaving in a “manly” way on board a warship was a part of this (see Hammar in this volume). The concept of masculinity during war has throughout history also had a dark side of abuse and rape. The complex subject of gender, sex and violence during war has been discussed from an early modern example by Maria Sjöberg (2016: 87–108).

Where we do not want to be

How should our longstanding fascination and obsession with war, killing and hero warriors be explained, when war and battles as discussed above seem to be rather rare events? Is this in fact a good argument for Thomas Hobbs’ old idea about our basic “wolf-like” nature? The real, evil side of our nature which is just covered by a veneer of ‘civilization’ and held in check by laws and regulations? Do we actually like war?

Not necessarily so. A first point regarding this is that human interest in and preoccupation with war, rather than being held back by culture and power structures, are instead often driven and encouraged by ideological structures and power-holders in society. Especially if one uses the most common definition of war, which stresses it as an organized systematic form of violence. The glorification of war and fighting heroes has been a favourite theme for rulers and potentates over the centuries. One finds it for example in
Homers famous descriptions of Achilles and Hector during the battle of Troy (for an interesting alternative interpretation of the *Iliad* as an anti-war book, see Kallifatides 2018:201).

Stories about war have held groups and states together, allowing soldiers to leave their homes and families and be part of regiments, armies and boat crews without excessive protests. It has also made the killing acceptable and even appreciated in some societies. Payment, military hierarchy, and reward have made warfare and training for war a way of life and a profession with a career structure. War industries and profit from both manufacturing and selling equipment for war has long been an important component of maintaining power regimes and of national economies at least since the early modern period and the formation of the new states during the 15th and 16th century.

The organized societal transformation process to prepare humans for war, to make them into warriors also has a surprisingly similar history on different places and reveals perhaps how the soldier’s mentality and identity is a construction. The initiation of young ancient Spartans during the 5th century BC and new Arctic Swedish rangers in the 1980s have a lot in common (see Haldén & Jackson 2016). Maybe such a preparation, such a transformation is necessary for ordinary humans in order for them to function in war? This process is then necessary regardless of whether one is to fight for an aggressive dictator or in the civil defence of a peaceful democracy.

A lot of research into the subject of killing further suggests that we are actually rather bad as killers. We are neither psychologically nor physically particularly effective unless we are trained and prepared for it. To make unwilling soldiers actually strive to kill the enemy has been a central problem for officers and military leaders throughout history (see Grossman, 2004 2009, Bourke 1999:57ff).

If one therefore chooses to believe Prince Kropotkin that humans are good, or at least that we are not predestined for fighting and killing, it can be argued that most human beings throughout history and all over the world prefer to use their social capacity to avoid direct conflict. They favour, if they have a choice, to cooperate and interact peacefully instead of using their skills and creativity for warfare.

This book about warfare and ships during the early modern period can then be seen as an examination of aspects and circumstances that contributed to the fact that it went so wrong on some occasions. A collection of examples of material culture, symbols, economic constraints, ideas, beliefs and ideo-
logical structures that are needed for making something so counterproductive and devastating for humans as warfare and bloody sea battles happen. Because to be on board a ship at war is not where we want to be.
References


