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BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan Haas (Ed.): *The Anthropology of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. xiv + 242).

by **Johan M.G. van der Dennen**

This volume stems from an advanced Seminar held in the USA in March, 1986. It contains the following nine chapters: Clark McCauley (Conference overview); Brian Ferguson (Explaining war); Clayton Robarchek (Motivations and material causes; on the explanation of conflict and war); Napoleon Chagnon (Reproductive and somatic conflicts of interest in the genesis of violence and warfare among tribesmen); Thomas Gregor (Uneasy peace: intertribal relations in Brazil's Upper Xingu); Thomas Gibson (Raiding, trading, and tribal autonomy in insular Southeast Asia); Neil Whitehead (The Snake Warriors – Sons of the Tiger's Teeth: a descriptive analysis of Carib warfare ca. 1500-1820); Jonathan Haas (Warfare and the evolution of tribal polities in the prehistoric Southwest); and Robert Carneiro (Chieftdom-level warfare as exemplified in Fiji and the Cauca Valley).

Although all chapters are very interesting, and eloquently and persuasively written, I shall attempt to resist the temptation to devote a discussion to all of them, and instead focus on (some of) the major controversies to which this volume owes its existence.

From its inception, the study of 'primitive' war (or war in tribal or pre-state-level or 'traditional' societies, as the current euphemism goes) has been fraught with controversies, in methodology as well as, and foremost, in substance. In essence these concerned, and still concern, assumptions about human nature underlying the contending theoretical positions (even if some schools claim to make no such assumptions whatsoever), the most important one being the *Ratomorphic* versus the *Ratiomorphic* view of the human condition. These conflicting paradigms are still rampant in the present volume. (The *Ratomorphic* image of Man – the term was coined by Robarchek – refers to the truncated, reductionist image of Man in behaviourist psychology: Man as just another kind of rat in the maze).

The various models of causation in explaining warfare, exemplified in this book, can be divided into three major schools of thought:

(a) The materialist/ecological school (as represented here by Ferguson and Carneiro), holding that the causes of warfare in tribal societies are to be found largely in the material foundations of the cultural system.

(b) The biocultural school (as represented by Chagnon) generally maintains that the causes of warfare are ultimately to be found in a combination of ecological and biological elements; and

(c) The historical school (as represented by Robarchek) argues that the explanation of war is to be found in the specific historical context of the events in question and the personal motivations of the people involved in those events.

The introductory chapter, by McCauley, presents an exceptionally lucid account of the conference's proceedings, in which he captures the quintessence of the controversies:

The inclusive fitness argument: The possibility of explaining war in terms of behaviour selected to maximize inclusive fitness was given considerable attention, at least as much as the “killer instinct” was given some twenty years ago (see Fried, Harris & Murphy, 1968). Still, the discussion did raise some doubts. For instance, if war increases somatic and, ultimately, reproductive success in individuals who fight, why is war not continuous and ubiquitous? The other problem discussed was how inclusive fitness maximization can be translated into the proximate mechanisms of individual motivations.

The cultural selection argument: At the conference, Chagnon and Dyson-Hudson argued for the importance of both biological and cultural selection in understanding warfare, while Carneiro and Ferguson remained largely unconvinced of the necessity of going beyond cultural selection. The pure version of cultural selection espoused by Ferguson maintains that pre-state war is carried out for material resources such as land, water, food, and trade goods. Even war that appears to be only for status can be understood as improving terms of trade for the group winning higher status. It is not necessary that individuals recognize the material goals that support their behaviour; just as biological selection can operate via proximate motives ultimately based on inclusive fitness, so can cultural selection operate on proximate goals of ritual, value, or religion that are associated with material success.

The culture as preadaptation argument: The idea of preadaptation is essentially historical: ecological change or stress would lead to cultural adaptation mediated by human choices based on pre-existing culture. The importance of this idea is that it emphasizes that ecological and especially material factors cannot be more than crude predictors of cultural change, since the same objective conditions can be interpreted very differently by different groups depending on the culture through which they understand these conditions. With regard to war, preadaptation means that social or material challenge or stress may or may not lead to war, depending on the history of the group.

Preadaptation especially means that war or peace, and particular directions of warlike or peaceful reactions, will be made more or less likely by the infrastructure of culture which is itself the product of group history. Such a view is apparently closer to the ratiomorphic than to the ratomorphic paradigm, and also inclines toward a *strategic* rather than a *cataclysmic* model of war.

Ferguson elaborates his excellent exposition of the materialist theory of war in the 1984 volume edited by him (Ferguson, 1984). He outlines the three mutually reinforcing premises that make this school ‘materialist’. The first is the endorsement of the causal primacy of the infrastructure. The second is that there may be competition between and selection among groups. The final materialist premise concerns motivation. Non-material goals will not regularly lead to war unless they accompany material objectives, and peace is expected if the probable costs of war are not outweighed by potential benefits.

The question whether the objective of “security against threats” can be properly labeled material is apparently immaterial to Ferguson. And I cannot help wondering if there is no more to war than a material cost/benefit calculus – a theoretical stance which easily degenerates into vulgar materialism: “*cherchez la ressource*”, and a translation of equally inadequate, though popular, modern ‘economic’ theories of war causation – even though,

admittedly, this theory of war is compatible with the ratiomorphic paradigm stressing the role of purposeful decisions made by thinking, cultural beings. Its motivational psychology, however, is basically limited to what Plato called *pleonexia* (greed).

Robarchek's chapter essentially duplicates his 1989 article "Primitive Warfare and the Ratiomorphic Image of Mankind" (Robarchek, 1989), so I use both contributions to clarify his line of thought. Robarchek rejects both teleological functionalism and materialism, together with some variants of sociobiology. He notes that

"Both terms of the 'material cause' equation are open to serious question. Are material causes, in fact 'material'? And are they 'causal'? That is, even if people specifically reason together and decide to go to war to acquire more wives, or more buffalo horses, or a better salmon stream, does the ultimate cause of the behavior lie in the 'material' end to be served? Or is it to be found in the cultural values that put a premium on salmon over other foods, or on buffalo horses as sources of status, or on multiple wives as symbols of virility or success?"

Also questionable is the causal primacy of the material world, the theoretical proposition that only material factors are relevant to the explanation of behavior. From there the ontological assumption is made that only material causes are 'real', thereby banishing human intentionality from the realm of science. Marvin Harris, for instance, "holds that 'the assumptions [that the human actor knows the purpose of meaning of his behavior] are totally alien to the spirit of science' (1964:91)". Of course, Harris *cum suis*, in their comfortable armchairs, know exactly why the 'primitive' warrior fights.

The solution most commonly proposed in ecological and sociobiological approaches to the problem of linking material 'cause' with behavioural 'effect' has been to relegate the intentionality to Culture, reifying and ascribing purposes to it, to make society and culture think for the people. Somehow, the 'correct' (in terms of inclusive fitness or ecological efficiency) decisions were institutionalized as part of the culture, as cow worship or female infanticide or polygyny or warfare. Individuals thereafter do not have to make decisions, they simply obey the dictates of their culture.

Once made explicit, however, this sort of 'solution' to the problem of motivation is obviously also unsatisfactory on several grounds. Not the least of these is that it simply pushes the decisions back into the past where the analyst does not have to deal with the processes involved. More seriously, it entails an unacceptable degree of cultural reification and cultural determinism.

While culture provides us at least with a partial answer to the question about the basis for choices among options. But considered as a determinant culture, too, is unacceptable. The existence of a culturally institutionalized pattern of behaviour (such as warfare) is at most a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition for its performance (It is not, in fact, even a necessary condition; if it were, culture change would be impossible).

Though the *peacefulness* of a number of human societies has slowly percolated into the anthropological literature – as witnessed by e.g. Leacock & Lee (1982), Foster & Rubinstein (1986), Pitt & Turner (1989), Silverberg & Gray (1992), and Sponsel & Gregor (1994) – probably the most unusual aspect of the conference was its considerable attention devoted to three peaceful societies (Buid, Semai, and Xinguanos – the latter actually being a conglomerate of disparate tribes living on Brazil's Upper Xingu River). Perhaps the most

notable commonality of these three peaceful groups – besides their egalitarian nature – is what Gregor calls an ‘antiviolent’ value system which stigmatizes many or all manifestations of violence; a value system supported by supernatural beliefs, and embodied in a (sometimes extravagantly ethnocentric and xenophobic) contrast between the peacefulness of the ingroup and the violence of outgroups. McCauley aptly remarks that apparently “hating violence requires violent people to hate”. This is disenchanting only for the dyed-in-the-wool pacifist who does not realize that everything in life, including peace, has its price.

This volume – which undoubtedly will appear to be a landmark in one of the most important intellectual challenges and controversies of our time: What image of man shall prevail – contains a combined subject and name index, and an integrated bibliography.

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