REVIEW OF PAUL CROOK DARWINISM, WAR AND HISTORY


by Johan M.G. van der Dennen

In the late seventies I wrote a number of volumes on Theories of War Causation, neatly classifying sociological, psychological, psychoanalytic, economic, ecological-demographic, political, etc. etc. theories about the basic ‘causes’ of war as these diverse disciplines envisaged them. After this exercise in ‘(meta)theoretical taxonomy’ there appeared to be a substantial residue of all kinds of theories that not so much located or identified causes of war, but that proclaimed the inevitability, or even the necessity of war, either for the purpose of preventing the ‘horrors’ of peace (such as decadence, effeminacy, and general pusillanimity), or because war was considered to be the Motor of Progress (moral, cultural, spiritual or otherwise), and ranging in formulation from the sad acceptance of a divine dictate to a full-blown panegyric. This rather heterogeneous category of authors is better known as the Apologists or Cheerleaders of War.

One school of these Apologists especially emphasized the necessity of struggle, violence and war for the ongoing biological evolution of human groups, ethnies, and cultures. This, I learned, was the so-called Social Darwinist school of thought. And this was my first encounter with this particular breed of evolutionists who tended to interpret Darwin’s “struggle for life” to include all levels of biotic (and even abiotic) existence (and elevate it to a universal principle), and “survival of the fittest” in terms of the bloody elimination of the weak and the vulnerable. “Nature: red in tooth and claw”; who could deny this Tennysonian metaphor?

Paul Crook, professor of history at the University of Queensland, is one of the latest of a modest number of writers on Social Darwinism (or Not-So-Social-Spencerism) in relation to war, covering the time span roughly from 1880 to 1919, the hey-days of war apologetics. Other aspects commonly associated with Social Darwinism, such as the eugenics movement, socio-economic laissez-faire politics, racialism, etc. have engendered a respectable body of literature, but they are excluded from this review which focuses on the role of war in human affairs as envisaged by the Motor-of-Progress theorists.

“Is it true, as the textbooks tell us, that Darwinism basically encouraged war and racist imperialism, that it generated violent images of ‘man the fighting animal’ – perceptions that paved the way for the holocaust of 1914-18?” the blurb text of the book asks rhetorically. Crook skillfully reconstructs the theories of war and human pugnacity of thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Walter Bagehot, Alfred Wallace, Thomas Huxley, Karl Pearson, Benjamin Kidd, Peter Kropotkin, Jacques Novicow, William McDougall, William James, Peter Chalmers Mitchell, William Graham Sumner and a host of now-forgotten naturalists, lesser deities and minor savants of the time. The book can be summarized in one sentence: The vicissitudes of Homo Pugnax and the cult of violence.

Before going on, I would like to remind the reader that the apology of war is not an invention of Social Darwinism; on the contrary, the entire history of European civilization has been characterized by more or less overt war-apologetic sentiments and doctrines (ranging in time
from the Classical Greeks up to the present moment and ranging in content from metaphysical-religious to political-étatistic), sometimes blossoming into a veritable glorification and deification of war (de Maistre, Proudhon, Hegel, Gobineau, Gumplovicz, Nietzsche, von Treitschke, von Moltke, among many others). What the Social Darwinists added to the gamut of arguments was the notion of inevitable, orthogenetic, progress (a notion mainly stemming from Spencer, not Darwin) through struggle (interpreted as ferocious fighting).

In his *Social Statics* (1851) Spencer preached the inexorable progress in the course of history from a violent and chaotic early human state to higher stages that led ultimately to civilization and peace. War, bloodshed, enmity and cruelty – these ‘manifold evils’ were endemic and inevitable in early history, mandated by predatory instincts. The forces that were working out the ultimate ‘great scheme of perfect happiness’ took no account of incidental suffering, and exterminated “such sections of mankind as stand in their way, with the same sternness as they exterminate beasts of prey and herds of useless ruminants. Be he human being, or be he brute, the hindrance must be got rid of. Just as the savage has taken the place of lower creatures, so must he, if he have remained too long a savage, give place to his superior” (pp. 454-5). With a few exceptions, most primitives were unsociable and warlike. They were in the early ‘egoistic’ stage. However, the general direction of social evolution, according to Spencer, was from egoism to altruism. War and population pressure were the triggering mechanisms that – despite their anti-social character – helped impel humanity forward into higher civilization. Challenges like war and crowding fostered among conquering races qualities of social cohesion, mutual aid, inventiveness in artifacts and weapons, economic specialization and human differentiation: “From the very beginning the conquest of one people over another has been, in the main, the conquest of social man over anti-social man” (p. 455).

War, thus, had played a vital role in emancipating humans from an unruly, savage state. War had brought social cohesion during the militant stage of social evolution, the basis for emerging nation states and empires. In the contemporary industrial society, however, war and militarism, Spencer asserted, had become retrogressive and dysgenic.

Struggle and violent competition (‘pugnacity’ or ‘fighting instinct’ were the contemporary terms), bloodshed and cruelty were generally regarded by the Social Darwinists as the crude filtering mechanisms by which species evolved and natural progress occurred. It was this ‘nasty’ aspect of natural selection that allegedly struck the 19th century imagination, the emphasis on differential mortality and the idea of the ‘law of the jungle’ as the harsh ruling principle governing not only animals in their habitats but also humans in their societies. It also provided ample justification for rampant capitalism and unbridled individualism/egoism, doctrines praising the ‘fit’ survivors (i.e., the wealthy) and damning the ‘unfit’, the losers, the poor, the human flotsam and jetsam, the Untermenschen. The rabidly racist and eugenetic doctrines, as well as the notions of Blut und Boden, Lebensraum, and frische, fröhliche Krieg of Nazi Germany found their origins here.

Thomas H. Huxley (epithet “Darwin’s bulldog”) characterized these doctrines as the ‘gladiatorial’ theory of existence, embodying an ethic of ‘reasoned savagery’, as the weak were perpetually eliminated by the strong, or the most ruthless, or the most ‘aggressive’ individuals, groups, nations, etc. Huxley rejected the Noble Savage myth, and he preached a survivalist ethics. The “weakest and stupidest went to the wall”. The toughest, shrewdest, and most adaptable survived.
Popularizers (à la Ardrey in the 1960s) from the 1880s on wrote about man as ‘killer ape’, possessing an ineradicable ‘instinct of pugnacity’, implying that if violence is a constant human potential, war is not an aberrant activity, but, on the contrary, a biological necessity. The Dutch apologist Steinmetz, combining Hegelian tortuosity and Social Darwinist callousness, was the most ‘sincere’ and consequential: If war, he stated, is a (biological, moral, cultural, spiritual) necessity, an act of God in which He weighs the vigor of nations in His scales, abolition of war would be deeply immoral.

The Platonic imagery of the Beast Within – the source of ignobility, the incarnation of rampant carnal lust and destructiveness – intensified in the later 19th century and converged with instinct-psychology formulations of man’s innate ineradicable violent urges. In 1870, anticipating MacLean’s triune brain and Bailey’s phylogenetic regression theory, Henry Maudsley (Body and Mind) claimed that there was a brute’s brain within man’s modern brain, as revealed by morbid psychology and the ‘degeneration of insanity’.

Darwin, on the one hand, recognized that endemic warfare among ‘savages’ and genetic usurpation had been important selective forces in human history, but, on the other hand, he did not talk in terms of instinctive pugnacity in humans and, in agreement with Spencer, he warned that modern warfare was utterly dysgenic by wasting the ‘best blood’ of the nation on the battlefield. He believed that through (violent conflict – first among ‘rude tribes’, then nations and empires – had come, and would come, higher ethics and broader sympathy, which would ultimately render war obsolete.

Most militaristically-inclined thinkers, however, conveniently forgot or ignored these sobering ideas and depicted war and battle as Stahlbad der Seele, in which a true man could prove his virility, vigor, valor and dignity.

Bagehot was responsible for the notion that, at the first stage of the struggle for life, the most obedient and ‘tamest’ tribes were the strongest, and that “Civilisation begins, because the beginning of civilisation is a military advantage”. Wars also encouraged innovation and variability. Darwin noted Bagehot’s argument that warfare could result in racial mixtures that begat ‘beneficial variability’.

Hereditarian discourses flourished in the late nineteenth century. There was evoked a fatalistic language of innate human criminality, bellicosity and atavism. There was widespread fin de siècle alarm about ‘degeneration’ (both morally and physically) in western culture. Among the prophets of biological doom and retrogression were W.M. Flinders Petrie, F.W. Headley and Homer Lea who proclaimed that the continuance of competition is essential to the well-being of the civilized community. In his Valor of Ignorance (1909) Lea forecast ‘gangrenous and fatal’ results if humans thwarted the primal laws of struggle.

The remorseless slaughter of the unfit was simply Nature’s drastic method of purifying and strengthening the human race. And wars were simply a test of a nation’s fitness and social or moral virtue; an instrument of collective selection; a safeguard against moral decay, decadence and degeneracy. War was, in brief, a ‘biological necessity’.

Ironically in the pre-1914 generation, as the world stood under the impending shadow of the First World War, thinkers were establishing beyond doubt the natural decline of warfare. While Jean de Bloch demonstrated that modern war was too costly and disruptive to be tolerated, and Norman Angell ‘proved’ that it was economically prohibitive, influential peace
apostles such as Jacques Novicow, David Starr Jordan and Vernon Kellogg dismissed war as biologically destructive and outmoded. An age of fevered nationalisms and militaristic determinisms also brought forth ‘peace eugenics’, a discourse that brilliantly used the new genetics to reinforce mainstream peace Darwinism (associated with the name and ideas of Peter Kropotkin), and conducted a furious rhetorical offensive against the militarists. War was excoriated as dysgenic, an anachronism fated to disappear as human history moved into a higher phase of civilization.

Kropotkin, by the way, was not, as he is sometimes represented, an uncritical devotee of the Noble Savage myth. He avoided both extremes of the Rousseauian idealization of savages and the charging them with every bestial quality imaginable. He offered an early version of ethnocentrism theory (ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility) to account for man’s inhumanity to man.

In works such as *La guerre et ses prétendus bienfaits* (1894), translated into English as *War and its Alleged Benefits* (1912), and *La critique du darwinisme social* (1910), Novicow attacked supposedly Darwinian doctrines that considered ‘collective homicide’ as the mainspring of progress, and he exposed the economic, moral and biological waste of war. War, he maintained, has always caused negative selection: it was the fit and brave who had always gone off to fight and die on the battlefield, while it was the cowardly, sick and deformed who were left behind to propagate. Novicow’s ‘scientific pacifism’ became virtually the orthodoxy of German and French peace movements in the pre-1914 years. Charles Richet, leading French physiologist and eugenist, dismissed war as an outmoded evolutionary factor in his *Peace and War* (1906) in which he openly attacked the whole idea of ‘war instincts’ and anticipated Margaret Mead’s celebrated dictum that war was a human invention rather than a biological necessity.

Havelock Ellis, Thorstein Veblen, and G.F. Nicolai proposed that the warlike spirit was being selected out, as fighting stocks were naturally killed off in wars and the field left to the unwarlike.

The bestiality of World War I lent new intensity to the mythology of the Beast Within, which was now encoded anew in biological terms. Wartime literature was replete with metaphors about the fragility of civilization and the ‘wild beast’ lurking within humanity under the flimsy veneer of civilization. Freud merely systematized current opinion when he proposed in 1915 that culture was a fallible human construct whose function was to constrain violent and libidinal primal impulses.

George Crile, Harry Campbell and Carveth Read all anticipated Dart’s and Ardrey’s ‘hunting hypothesis’ by emphasizing how man, the hunting animal, hunted in packs which intensified human combativeness. In war they simply hunted each other.

After the First World War Peter Chalmers Mitchell’s *Evolution and the War* (1915) constituted one of the more intelligent restatements of the ‘optimist’ tradition on the biology of war. Mitchell showed how people had misread Darwin’s concept of struggle. Whereas Darwin used the concept of struggle in a large metaphorical sense, including dependence of organisms on one another, popularists gave it “the special significance of fierceness and cruelty”.
The pre-1919 debate over ‘the biology of war’ may seem remote to us now. However the resonances of that debate still echo in modern controversies. This is particularly so in the case of modern ethology and sociobiology. The founding fathers of these disciplines, most notably Konrad Lorenz and Edward O. Wilson, put neo-Darwinian interpretations of aggression based upon a speculative biohistory of humankind. So of course did a number a thinkers briefly dealt with here. One of Crook’s two main theses in his brilliantly and eloquently written book is that

ethologists and sociobiologists seem to suffer from collective amnesia about their forebears. They have been remarkably reticent in acknowledging their intellectual ancestry, especially in the period before the great synthesising theories of Fisher, Sewall Wright and Haldane in the 1920s. When occasionally turning their hands to history, sociobiologists have given very garbled accounts of ‘Social Darwinism’ which they regard as an ideological taint to be avoided (p. 196).

Sociobiology, as everybody remembers, has been accused of about everything the accuser thinks abominable or abject, from sexism and racism to conservative politics and reactionary ethics. Crook’s accusation of collective amnesia, however, deserves at least to be taken seriously. As an illustration: almost every major theme in the chapter on aggression in Wilson’s On Human Nature can be located in works written before 1919. Writers cited in Crook’s book variously explained war in what have now become familiar sociobiological terms of territoriality, crowding, competition for resources, sexual and reproductive advantage, innate ethnocentrism and hostility to strangers, pseudospeciation, etcetera.

The second main thesis of the book, namely that Darwinism bred an influential tradition of non-violence, is hardly congruent with the familiar textbook scenario that Darwin’s theory unleashed primarily harsh and divisive, conflict-based social doctrines. Yet, Crook is also convincing on this point.

As belated repentance for their sins this magnificent book should be read by all students of all bio-disciplines.