



War is a staple of civilization. Its mass, rationalized, chronic presence has increased as civilization has spread and deepened. Among the specific reasons it doesn't go away is the desire to escape the horror of mass-industrial life. Mass society of course finds its reflection in mass soldiery and it has been this way from early civilization. In the age of hyper-developing technology, war is fed by new heights of dissociation and disembodiment. We are ever further from a grounding or leverage from which to oppose it (while too many accept paltry, symbolic "protest" gestures).

How did it come to be that war is "the proper work of man," in the words of Homer's *Odyssey*? We know that organized warfare advanced with early industry and complex social organization in general, but the question of origins predates even Homer's early Iron Age. The explicit archaeological/anthropological literature on the subject is surprisingly slight.

Civilization has always had a basic interest in holding its subjects captive by touting the necessity of official armed force. It is a prime ideological claim that without the state's monopoly on violence, we would be unprotected and insecure. After all, according to Hobbes, the human condition has been and will always be that of "a war of all against all." Modern voices, too, have argued that humans are innately aggressive and violent, and so need to be constrained by armed authority. Raymond Dart (e.g. *Adventures with the Missing Link*, 1959), Robert Ardrey (e.g. *African Genesis*, 1961), and Konrad Lorenz (e.g. *On Aggression*, 1966) are among the best known, but the evidence they put

forth has been very largely discredited.

In the second half of the 20th century, this pessimistic view of human nature began to shift. Based on archaeological evidence, it is now a tenet of mainstream scholarship that pre-civilization humans lived in the absence of violence—more specifically, of organized violence. Eibl-Eibesfeldt referred to the !Kobushmen as not bellicose: "Their cultural ideal is peaceful coexistence, and they achieve this by avoiding conflict, that is by splitting up, and by emphasizing and encouraging the numerous patterns of bonding."¹ An earlier judgement by W.J. Perry is generally accurate, if somewhat ideal-

ized: "Warfare, immorality, vice, polygyny, slavery, and the subjection of women seem to be absent among our gatherer-hunter ancestors."²

The current literature consistently reports that until the final stages of the Paleolithic Age—until just prior to the present 10,000-year era of domestication—there is no conclusive evidence that any tools or hunting weapons were used against humans at all.³ "Depictions of battle scenes, skirmishes and hand-to-hand combat are rare in hunter-gatherer art and when they do occur most often result from contact with agriculturalists or industrialized invaders," concludes Taçon and Chippindale's study of Australian rock art.⁴ When conflict began to emerge, encounters rarely lasted more than half an hour, and if a death occurred both parties would retire at once.⁵

The record of Native Americans in California is similar. Kroeber reported that their fighting was "notably bloodless. They even went so far as to take poorer arrows to war than they used in economic hunting."⁶ Wintu people of Northern California called off hostilities once someone was injured.⁷ "Most Californians were absolutely nonmilitary; they possessed next to none of the traits requisite for the military horizon, a condition that would have taxed their all but nonexistent social organization too much. Their societies made no provision for collective political action," in the view of Turney-High.⁸ Lorna Marshall described Kung! Bushmen as celebrating no valiant heroes or tales of battle. One of them remarked, "Fighting is very dangerous; someone

might get killed!"⁹ George Bird Grinnell's "Coups and Scalp Among the Plains Indians"¹⁰ argues that counting coup (striking or touching an enemy with the hand or a small stick) was the highest point of (essentially nonviolent) bravery, whereas scalping was not valued.

The emergence of institutionalized warfare appears to be associated with domestication, and/or a drastic change in a society's physical situation. As Glassman puts it, this comes about "only where band peoples have been drawn into the warfare of horticulturalists or herders, or driven into an ever-diminishing territory."¹¹ The first reliable archaeological evidence of warfare is that of fortified, pre-Biblical Jericho, c. 7500 B.C. In the early Neolithic a relatively sudden shift happened. What dynamic forces may have led people to adopt war as a social institution? To date, this question has not been explored in any depth by archaeologists.

Symbolic culture appears to have emerged in the Upper Paleolithic; by the Neolithic it was firmly established in human cultures everywhere. The symbolic has a way of effacing particularity, reducing human presence in its specific, non-mediated aspects. It is easier to direct violence against a faceless enemy who represents some officially defined evil or threat. Ritual is the earliest known form of purposive symbolic activity: symbolism acting in the world. Archaeological evidence suggests that there may be a link between ritual and the emergence of organized warfare.

During the almost timeless era when humans were not interested in dominating their surroundings, certain places were special and came to be known as sacred sites. This was based on a spiritual and emotional kinship with the land, expressed in various forms of totemism or custodianship. Ritual begins to appear, but is not central to band or forager societies. Emma Blake observes, "Although the peoples of the Paleolithic practiced rituals, the richest material residues date from the Neolithic period onward, when sedentism and the domestication of plants and animals brought changes to the outlook and cosmology of people everywhere."¹² It was in the Upper Paleolithic that certain strains and tensions caused by the development of specialization first became evident. Inequities can be measured by such evidence as differing amounts of goods at hearth sites in encampments; in response, ritual appears to have begun to play a greater social role. As many have noted, ritual in this context is a way of addressing deficiencies of cohesion or solidarity; it is a means of guaranteeing a social order that has become problematic. As Bruce Knauft saw, "ritual reinforces and puts beyond argument or question certain highly general propositions about the spiritual and human world...[and] predisposes deep-seated cognitive acceptance and behavioral compliance with these cosmological propositions."¹³ Ritual thus provides the original ideological glue for societies now in need of such legitimating assistance. Face-to-face solutions become ineffective as social solutions, when communities become complex and already partly stratified. The symbolic is a non-solution; in fact, it is a type of enforcer of relationships and world-views characterized by inequality and estrangement.

Ritual is itself a type of power, an early, pre-state form of politics. Among the Maring people of Papua New Guinea, for instance, the conventions of the ritual cycle specify duties or roles in the absence of explicitly political authorities. Sanctity is therefore a functional alternative to politics; sacred conventions, in effect, govern society.¹⁴ Ritualization is clearly an early strategic arena for the incorporation of power relations. Further, warfare can be a sacred undertaking, with militarism promoted ritually, blessing emergent social hierarchy.

René Girard proposes that rituals of sacrifice are a necessary counter to endemic aggression and violence in society.¹⁵ Something nearer to the reverse is more the case: ritual legitimates and enacts violence. As Lienhardt said of the Dinka herders of Africa, to “make a feast or sacrifice often implies war.”¹⁶ Ritual does not substitute for war, according to Arkush and Stanish: “warfare in all times and places has ritual elements.”¹⁷ They see the dichotomy between “ritual battle” and “real war” to be false, summarizing that “archaeologists can expect destructive warfare and ritual to go hand in hand.”¹⁸

It is not only among Apache groups, for example, that the most ritualized were the most agricultural,¹⁹ but that so often ritual has mainly to do with agriculture and warfare, which are often very closely linked.²⁰ It is not uncommon to find warfare itself seen as a means of enhancing the fertility of cultivated ground. Ritual regulation

of production and belligerence means that domestication has become the decisive factor. “The emergence of systematic warfare, fortifications, and weapons of destruction,” says Hassan, “follows the path of agriculture.”²¹

Ritual evolves into religious systems, the gods come forth, sacrifice is demanded. “There is no doubt that all the inhabitants of the unseen world are greatly interested in human agriculture,” notes anthropologist Verrier Elwin.²² Sacrifice is an excess of domestication, involving domesticated animals and occurring only in agricultural societies.

Ritual killing, including human sacrifice, is unknown in non-domesticated cultures.²³

Corn in the Americas tells a parallel story. An abrupt increase in corn agriculture brought with it the rapid elaboration of hierarchy and militarization in large parts of both continents.²⁴ One instance among many is the northward intrusion of the Hohokams against the indigenous Ootams²⁵ of southern Arizona, introducing agriculture and organized warfare. By about 1000 A.D. the farming of maize had become dominant throughout the Southwest, complete with year-round

ritual observances, priest-hoods, social conformity, human sacrifice, and cannibalism.²⁶ It is hardly an understatement to say, with Kroeber, that with maize agriculture, “all cultural values shifted.”²⁷

Horses are another instance of the close connection between domestication and war. First domesticated in the Ukraine around 3000 B.C., their objectification fed militarism directly. Almost from the very beginning they served as machines; most importantly, as war machines.²⁸

The relatively harmless kinds of intergroup fighting described above gave way to systematic killing as domestication led to increasing competition for land.²⁹ The drive for fresh land to be exploited is widely accepted as the leading specific cause of war throughout the course of civilization. Once-dominant feelings of gratitude toward a freely giving nature and knowledge of the crucial interdependence of all life are replaced by the ethos of domestication: humans versus the natural world. This enduring power struggle is the template for the wars it constantly engenders. There was awareness of the price exacted by the



paradigm of control, as seen in the widespread practice of symbolic regulation or amelioration of domestication of animals in the early Neolithic. But such gestures do not alter the fundamental dynamic at work, any more than they preserve millions of years’ worth of gatherer-hunters’ practices that balanced population and subsistence.

Agricultural intensification meant more warfare. Submission to this pattern requires that all aspects of society form an integrated whole from which there is little

or no escape. With domestication, division of labor now produces full-time specialists in coercion: for example, definitive evidence shows a soldier class established in the Near East by 4500 B.C. The Jivaro of Amazonia, for millennia a harmonious component of the biotic community, adopted domestication, and “have elaborated blood revenge and warfare to a point where these activities set the tone for the whole society.”³⁰ Organized violence becomes pervasive, mandatory, and normative.

Expressions of power are the essence of civilization, with its core principle of patriarchal rule. It may be that systematic male dominance is a by-product of war. The ritual subordination and devaluation of women is certainly advanced by warrior ideology, which increasingly emphasized “male” activities and downplayed women’s roles.

The initiation of boys is a ritual designed to produce a certain type of man, an outcome that is not at all guaranteed by mere biological growth. When group cohesion can no longer be taken for granted, symbolic institutions are required—especially to further compliance with pursuits such as warfare. Lemmonier’s judgment is that “male initiations... are connected by their very essence with war.”³¹

Polygyny, the practice of one man taking multiple wives, is rare in gatherer-hunter bands, but is the norm for war-making village societies.³² Once again, domestication is the decisive factor. It is no coincidence that circumcision rituals by the Merida people of Madagascar culminated in aggressive military parades.³³ There have been instances where women not only hunt but also go into combat (e.g. the Amazons of Dahomey; certain groups in Borneo), but it is clear that gender construction has tended toward a masculinist, militarist direction. With state formation, warriorship was a common requirement of citizenship, excluding women from political life.

War is not only ritualistic, usually with many ceremonial features; it is also a very formalized practice. Like ritual itself, war is performed via strictly prescribed movements, gestures, dress, and forms of speech. Soldiers are identical and structured in a standardized display. The formations of organized violence, with their columns and lines, are like agriculture and its rows: files on a grid.³⁴ Control and discipline are thus served, returning to the theme of ritualized behavior, which is always an increased elaboration of authority.

Exchange between bands in the Paleolithic functioned less as trade (in the economic sense) than as exchange of information. Periodic intergroup gatherings offered marriage opportunities, and insured against resource shortfalls. There was no clear differentiation of social and economic spheres. Similarly, to apply our word “work” is misleading in the absence of production or commodities. While territoriality was part of forager-hunter activity, there is no evidence that it led to war.³⁵

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We are, as Griffin puts it, divided against ourselves. Where does this, then, leave women? Are we, as some male philosophers would have it, less capable of rational and symbolic thought? The idea of a strict division between genetical and social is severely symptomatic of western polarized thinking. There exist no absolute genetical predispositions. The concept of inherited traits has meaning only in a specified context; genotype is inextricably linked to phenotype; in isolation, the former is a mere abstraction. One might also point out that even if statistical differences were found between men and women, the fact that even a few individuals might not be correctly described by the statistical model, would be an argument against imposing societal norms that would limit the individual freedom of (at least) these individuals.

On the other hand, a complete denial of any dependence upon the biological conditions of the human organism is absurd. Humans have evolved during hundreds of thousands of years, and the evolution has been fully determined by the physical surroundings. Our eyes have gotten their form in dialogue with caribou, mayfly and nuthatch; our tongues are a product of clear spring water and ripe plums. All that we experience as meaningful, even the most abstract construction, we experience using thought that took form during millions of years on vast savannas, and under wet rocks. To, like Judith Butler and other postmodernist feminist thinkers have, take a stance of complete physiological relativism does nothing to resolve the constructed gap between mind and matter.

It is clear that women are to a great extent participating in upholding and recreating patriarchal structures. Women's liberation is by many feminists identified with the masculinization of women. In general, though, women are not as encouraged to build their personal identities around domination and transcendence of nature. Instead, we are generally brought up to develop capabilities of listening and sensing. In patriarchal society, however, a most fundamental capacity is taken from us, the capacity to listen to ourselves. We are taught to fill the needs of men, rather than to acknowledge those of our own. In reclaiming this capacity, though, we might also be able to use the values that have been taught to us in creating a world that is undivided, undenied, livable.

On the Origins of War (continued from page 13)

by John Zerzan

Domestication erects the rigid boundaries of surplus and private property, with concomitant possessiveness, enmity, and struggle for ownership. Even conscious mechanisms aimed at mitigating the new realities cannot remove their ever-present, dynamic force. In *The Gift*, Mauss portrayed exchange as peacefully resolved war, and war as the result of unsuccessful transactions; he saw the potlatch as a sort of sublimated warfare.³⁶

Before domestication, boundaries were fluid. The freedom to leave one band for another was an integral part of forager life. The more or less forced integration demanded by complex societies provided a staging ground conducive to organized violence. In some places, chiefdoms arose from the suppression of smaller communities' independence. Proto-political centralization was at times pushed forward in the Americas by tribes desperately trying to confederate to fight European invaders. Ancient civilizations spread as a result of war, and it can be said that warfare is both a cause of statehood, and its result.

Not much has changed since war was first instituted, rooted in ritual and given full-growth potential by domestication. Marshall Sahlins first pointed out that increased work follows developments in symbolic culture. It's also the case that culture begets war, despite claims to the contrary. After all, the impersonal character of civilization grows with the ascendance of the symbolic. Symbols (e.g. national flags) allow our species to dehumanize our fellow-humans, thus enabling systematic intra-species carnage.

Notes:

- ¹ Eibl-Eibesfeldt, "Aggression in the !Ko-Bushman," in Martin A. Nettlehip, ed., *War, its Causes and Correlates* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 293.
- ² W.J. Perry, "The Golden Age," in *The Hibbert Journal* XVI (1917), p. 44.
- ³ Arthur Ferrill, *The Origins of War from the Stone Age to Alexander the Great* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 16.
- ⁴ Paul Taçon and Christopher Chippindale, "Australia's Ancient Warriors: Changing Depictions of Fighting in the Rock Art of Arnhem Land, N.T.," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4:2 (1994), p. 211.
- ⁵ Maurice R. Davie, *The Evolution of War: A Study of Its Role in Early Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 247.
- ⁶ A.L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California: Bulletin 78* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1923), p. 152.
- ⁷ Christopher Chase-Dunn and Kelly M. Man, *The Wintu and their Neighbors* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), p. 101.
- ⁸ Harry Holbert Turney-High, *Primitive War: Its Practice and Concepts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1949), p. 229.
- ⁹ Lorna Marshall, "Kung! Bushman Bands," in Ronald Cohen and John Middleton, eds., *Comparative Political Systems* (Garden City: Natural History Press, 1967), p. 17.

¹⁰ George Bird Grinnell, "Coup and Scalp among the Plains Indians," *American Anthropologist* 12 (1910), pp. 296-310. John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty make the same point in their *Cheyenne Memories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 61-69. Also, Turney-High, *op. cit.*, pp. 147, 186.

¹¹ Ronald R. Glassman, *Democracy and Despotism in Primitive Societies, Volume One* (Millwood, New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1986), p. 111.

¹² Emma Blake, "The Material Expression of Cult, Ritual, and Feasting," in Emma Blake and A. Bernard Knapp, eds., *The Archaeology of Mediterranean Prehistory* (New York: Blackwell, 2005), p. 109.

¹³ Bruce M. Knauft, "Culture and Cooperation in Human Evolution," in Leslie Sponsel and Thomas Gregor, eds., *The Anthropology of Peace and Nonviolence* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1994), p. 45.

¹⁴ Roy A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 236-237.

¹⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Like Ardrey and Lorenz, Girard starts from the absurd view that all social life is steeped in violence.

¹⁶ G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 281.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Arkush and Charles Stanish, "Interpreting Conflict in the Ancient Andes: Implications for the Archaeology of Warfare," *Current Anthropology* 46:1 (February 2005), p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ James L. Haley, *Apaches: A History and Culture Portrait* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), pp. 95-96.

²⁰ Rappaport, *op. cit.*, p. 234, for example.

²¹ Quoted by Robert Kuhlken, "Warfare and Intensive Agriculture in Fiji," in Chris Gosden and Jon Hather, eds., *The Prehistory of Food: Appetites for Change* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 271. Works such as Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Pierre Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1994) somehow manage to overlook this point.

²² Verrier Elwin, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 300.

²³ Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 197, 202.

²⁴ Christine A. Hastorf and Sissel Johannessen, "Becoming Corn-Eaters in Prehistoric America," in Johannessen and Hastorf, eds., *Corn and Culture in the Prehistoric New World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), especially pp. 428-433.

²⁵ Charles Di Peso, *The Upper Pima of San Cayetano de Tumacacori* (Flagstaff, AZ: Amerind Foundation, 1956), pp. 19, 104, 252, 260.

²⁶ Christy G. Turner II and Jacqueline A. Turner, *Man Corn: Cannibalism and Violence in the Prehistoric American Southwest* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), pp. 3, 460, 484.

²⁷ A.L. Kroeber, *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 224.

²⁸ Harold B. Barclay, *The Role of the Horse in Man's Culture* (London: J.A. Allen, 1980), e.g. p. 23.

²⁹ Richard W. Howell, "War Without Conflict," in Nettlehip, *op. cit.*, pp. 683-684.

³⁰ Betty J. Meggers, *Amazonia: Man and Culture in Counterfeit Paradise* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971), pp. 108, 158.

³¹ Pierre Lemmonier, "Pigs as Ordinary Wealth," in Pierre Lemmonier, ed., *Technological Choices: Transformation in Material Cultures since the Neolithic* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 132.

³² Knauft, *op. cit.*, p. 50. Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 39.

³³ Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 88.

³⁴ The "rank-and-file" of organized labor is another product of these originals.

³⁵ Robert L. Carneiro, "War and Peace," in S.P. Reyna and R.E. Downs, eds., *Studying War: Anthropological Perspectives* (Langhorm, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1994), p. 12.

³⁶ Cited and discussed in Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972), pp. 174, 182.

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