

War is a Cultural Institution

Excerpt from *The Tears of Llorona* by Craig Chalquist, MS PhD
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Some believe that warfare is simply a fact of human nature. Freud thought so, and yet the sheer destructiveness displayed by the ignition of WW I shocked even him:

Then the war in which we had refused to believe broke out, and brought—disillusionment. Not only is it more sanguinary and more destructive than any war of other days, because of the enormously increased perfection of weapons of attack and defense; but it is at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it...When the community has no rebuke to make, there is an end of all suppression of the baser passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so incompatible with their civilization that one would have held them to be impossible.

“Our logic is at fault,” he wrote to Albert Einstein, “if we ignore the fact that right is founded on brute force and even today needs violence to maintain it....In some happy corners of the earth, they say, where nature brings forth abundantly whatever man desires, there flourish races whose lives go gently by, unknowing of aggression or constraint. This I can hardly credit; I would like further details about these happy folk.” He wasn’t much of an anthropologist. Even now, a strange perception floats among some psychoanalysts that those who biologize destructiveness are somehow more realistic than those naïve optimists who do not.

But the war = instinct equation cannot solve so neatly. Studies of indigenous communities in which even extreme physical aggression never degenerates into organized warfare suggest that the Hobbesian vision of continual warfare of all against all is a projective artifact of sloppy science. In our haste to conclude that laws and armies and other civilized amenities help us get along with one another, we overlook the possibility that they actually do the opposite. Organized warfare is as old as written history. What if it is not older?

Nor can examples of indigenous warfare be taken as typical of prehistoric practices. As recently as 2003, archaeologist R. Brian Ferguson found no evidence of organized warfare—with a single archaeological exception—prior to ten thousand years ago. No slaughters perpetrated by ungoverned savages, no Hobbesian free-for-all, no Freudian primal father eaten by his envious sons; just a single site along the Nile River in Sudan where twenty-four skeletons were uncovered in proximity to stone projectiles. And even that group is thought to have suffered from a recently depleted food supply. In all the wide world, Ferguson found perhaps a dozen skeletons ten thousand years old that may or may not bear signs of violence—as opposed to

thousands of bodies and heaps of evidence from around 6,500 BCE onward: the very period when villages had hardened into permanent urban centers guarded by walls and forts. If we were massacring each other before then, why doesn't the archaeological record reflect it? Perhaps, as anthropologist Raymond Kelly suggests, warfare does not arise outside of bonded groups like clans and rudimentary governments: in other words, social hierarchies that establish and rely on unequal distributions of basic resources.

Erich Fromm pointed out another flaw in the instinct theory of warfare. By putting it all down to "human nature" and thereby transporting it off the field of inquiry (how often "that's just how I am" has served to place some noxious behavior beyond examination), the equation of destructiveness with instinct blurs a crucial distinction between two very different forms of aggression: the protective kind that serves life, and the malignant kind that destroys it. A raid against an ancestral enemy is not an Inquisition, nor can resistance to dehumanization or displacement stand comparison, psychologically or otherwise, to the necrophilic paranoia and hatred driving well-planned acts of genocide. Or campaigns to silence those who protest. Lewis Mumford's point holds:

Those who attempt to impute war to man's biological nature, treating it as a manifestation of the ravenous "struggle for existence," or as a carry-over of instinctive animal aggression, show little insight into the difference between the fantastic ritualized massacres of war and other less-organized varieties of hostility, conflict, and potentially murderous antagonism. Pugnacity and rapacity and slaughter for food are biological traits, at least among the carnivores: but war is a cultural institution.

Nevertheless, power-addicted elites have rooted for millennia for the cynical belief that what is instinctive or wild needs to be rigidly controlled, even by warfare if necessary. (Leaders favor war, Ferguson suggests, because war favors leaders.) But if what remains untamed, in us and outside us, possesses its own kind of intrinsic order, especially when tended to consciously and responsibly, then the borders, the edicts, the entire perennial armory of suppression and domestication can only produce the very results their designers claim they fear while depending on them for political and religious self-justification: chaos, violence, wars without end. With no impulses to bridle, no souls to save, and no aggression to control beyond the disorganized ragings found in any human community, the red-handed architects of empire would find themselves handed a well-deserved pinkslip.