# THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF WAR AND VIOLENCE

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**Contents**

**Summary**

This chapter surveys research on violence and war conducted by physical anthropologists, archaeologists, and cultural (or social) anthropologists. After an introduction to the subject in Section 1, Section 2 reviews attempts to define violence and war and identifies weaknesses in these definitions. Section 3 provides a brief history of anthropological work on violence and war, identifying two major phases: traditional approaches that focus on violence and war across the spectrum of ethnographically and archaeologically known societies, and recent approaches that attend to violence and war in the contemporary and recent historical world and to the construction of peace. Sections 4, 5, 6, and 7 review the traditional approaches. Setting the subject within a phylogenetic framework, Section 4 examines current explanations for the distribution of lethal violence across species, the evolution of coalitional violence, and the emergence of raiding behavior in chimpanzees and humans. It also evaluates archaeological findings about the antiquity of war. Section 5 reviews anthropological theorizing about the causes, conduct, and consequences of war. Section 6 assesses findings and theories about the impact of war on ecology and vice-versa. Section 7 summarizes recent research on how state expansion in foreign lands may have insidiously affected the patterns of indigenous warfare that provided much of the empirical data on which traditional approaches are based. Sections 8 and 9 review anthropological work on violence and war in the recent and contemporary world. Section 8 outlines work on the globalization of violence and war, as it has manifest itself in rebellions, ethnic and civil

wars, genocide, and terrorism. Section 9 describes the most common analytical theme in these studies, the relation between violence and cultural meaning. Section 10 examines the recent movement, stimulated by the globalization of violence, to highlight the cross-cultural study of peace as well as of violence and war.

## 1. Introduction

Collective lethal violence of one sort or another occurs in most ethnographically known societies and has attracted anthropological interest from the very beginnings of academic anthropology. Interest in the subject has fluctuated markedly, however, and only recently has it begun to attract the kind of sustained attention that anthropology has long devoted to 'traditional' topics such as kinship, politics, and religion.

Summaries of the anthropology of war and its disciplinary history conventionally cast it as a dispute between two camps with opposed conceptions of humanity. As Malinowski phrased the issue almost 70 years ago, anthropologists subscribed to a view either of the "primeval pacifism of man" or of war as "an essential heritage of man". Sixty years later, another history of the field detected the same two scholarly camps: Hawks conceptualize humans as essentially bellicose, combat as intentionally deadly, and war as extending far into humanity's past; Doves supposedly view humans as essentially peaceable, combat as non-dangerous and ineffective, and war as a recent invention. Other scholars, meanwhile, cast the split in even more profound terms, seeing the dichotomy as deeply sedimented in western thinking and stretching back at least as far as the Enlightenment to Hobbes's view of pre-state society as a "war of all men against all men" and Rousseau's conception of the pre-modern, "noble savage" as an individual to whom violent conflict was foreign.

These two camps persist to the present, their exchanges sometimes laced with a highly charged rhetoric. One influential recent work accuses archaeologists in particular and anthropologists more generally of absurdity, falsity, and sophistry in manufacturing and perpetrating a "myth of the peaceful savage" that has falsely "pacified the past." For its part, the opposed camp decries a "traditional" anthropological myth of "savage savagery," implying that such a view is at best naïve, at worst dangerously immoral.

The rhetorical *sturm und drang* notwithstanding, a close reading of the recent literature reveals at least as much agreement as disagreement between these two, supposedly opposed camps. Neither side, for example, denies the obvious: modernity has been associated with epic levels of collective lethal violence, indicating that, whether they are essentially warlike or peaceable, humans are certainly capable of large-scale brutality and bloodshed. Furthermore, it is impossible to find a scholar who categorically insists that humans always are and always have been violent, just as it is to identify any theorist who insists that humans were entirely peaceful prior to modernity. Rather, scholars on both sides of the putative divide allow that *some* societies are or were more warlike and that others are or were more peaceful. Both sides also appear to allow that a society can shift from a warlike to a peaceful stance depending on circumstances. In addition, there is agreement that humans can and in the past did practice various forms of collective lethal violence, though there is disagreement on whether or not this should be considered war.

In sum, the anthropological approach to war is not nor ever has been split between stark, diametrically opposed views of humanity and its disposition towards war or peace. Behind the rhetoric are instead differences over what should be taken to constitute war as opposed to other forms of collective violence; the *degree* to which humans are and have been warlike or peaceful; and what forms of collective violence should rightly occupy anthropological attention. Sharpened by the politics of academic debate, nonetheless, these differences have starkly affected the way violence and war get defined, how ethnographic and archaeological data on lethal violence get interpreted (or over-interpreted), and which forms of violence are foregrounded as analytically significant.

## 2. Defining War and Violence

Anthropologists have afforded very little effort to defining physical violence, adhering in the main to standard dictionary definitions that it is action or treatment by one human agent of another so as to injure or abuse. Lethal violence is then violence that results in death. Violence occurs in a wide range of behaviors including crime, spousal abuse, capital punishment, sacrifice, gang fighting, and sports, but anthropologists have devoted most of their effort to studying that "species of the genus of violence" known as war. Where violence has provoked little definitional debate, whole barrels of ink continue to be exhausted on the definition of war.

Notwithstanding numerous differences in detail, traditional anthropological definitions of war have included three principal components. The first defines war as *armed* violence – as, e.g., "armed conflict," "armed combat," "armed contest." By this is meant violence perpetrated with some kind weaponry, defensive armor, or both. It is not at all clear why warfare should only be considered such if it involves arms, and the assertion is problematic in so far as commandos sometimes resort to unarmed violence (e.g., strangulation, eye-gouging) to maintain the element of surprise. The stipulation also would seem to exclude from war such modern combat techniques as cyber warfare, electromagnetic pulsing, and short-circuiting of the enemy's electrical grid - non-lethal tactics that are difficult to consider as "armed" combat without resorting to a circular reasoning in which arms are defined as any tool used to prosecute war.

The second component of traditional definitions of war stipulates that it is *organized*: thus, war is "organized conflict," "organized military force," or a "group activity." The problem here is a failure to define what constitutes organized as opposed to unorganized violence. What seems to be intended, though, is a derivative of the third definitional component of war: war is violence that occurs between *groups*. Thus war is said to involve "collectivities," "units," "groups" (or "social groups"), "communities," "independent political units," "sovereign political entities," "politically constituted, autonomous groups," groups "of people whose membership is defined in terms of occupancy of a common territory," "territorial unit[s] (at the community level on up)," "organic entities," and so on. This third definitional component aims to distinguish war from other forms of violence by specifying that it is a) violence directed outside rather than within a social group or unit; and b) violence "sanctioned" or "authorized" by that group. By specifying that war is violence directed outside a group, for example, war is distinguished from internal forms of collective violence and killing such as penal and

capital punishment or urban gang 'warfare.' By specifying that it is sanctioned or authorized violence, war is also identified as an act of social or national policy as opposed to the kind of unsanctioned violence perpetrated by international teams of hit men, revolutionary guerilla groups, or terrorist organizations.

The problem with this third definitional component lies in operationalizing it. Definitions of war as combat between vaguely specified "groups" or "units" ignore the fact that humans organize themselves into many different sorts of groups simultaneously – families, sub-clans, clans, tribes, villages (not to mention towns and cities), chiefdoms, nation-states, military alliances, and so on. Without further specification of the type of group or unit at issue, this definition transforms armed fighting at all levels of a social structure into warfare: the armed clashes that sometimes occur between families in the same clan, or between clans within the same village or chiefdom, are classed as warfare on a par with armed clashes between families or clans drawn from different, 'enemy' villages or chiefdoms. Obviously, this is not what is intended, and other definitions are careful to specify that war occurs only between 'sovereign groups' or "independent political communities." Even these definitions, though, fall hostage to ambiguity because the terms "sovereign" and "independent" are underdefined. Hunter-gatherer social organization is sometimes constituted by connubia made up of bands, the latter being part of the former yet also capable of acting independently of it. So-called 'tribal' societies are often organized as village communities made up of clans and organized into military alliances, the component clans of a village sometimes acting together as a village group yet, on other occasions, also capable of waging war independently of it. In such cases, the failure clearly to specify what constitutes a 'sovereign' unit makes it difficult to decide what constitutes inter-group as opposed to intra-group violence.

In recent years, the traditional definition of war has fallen under fire but for a different reason, for indiscriminately lumping together what one critic calls "the enormous cross-cultural, historical, and situational variations and variability in intergroup aggression." Defining war as armed combat between sovereign groups, the complaint goes, falsely equates such disparate forms of violence as "chimpanzee coalitional killings," human "brawls," "homicides," "a few people fighting," "capital punishment," "personal self-redress," "revenge killings," "feuding," "spontaneous conflict over resources," "raiding for wives or trophy heads, or to settle old grievances," and "large-scale warfare" between nation states.

These complaints are not entirely accurate: in the traditional definition, homicide and capital punishment can be, and routinely are, distinguished from war. Many scholars moreover have sought to distinguish feuding (or revenge killing) from war and other forms of inter-group violence. The principal criticism, however, is that by classing as war all forms of armed combat between sovereign groups, the traditional definition fails to acknowledge crucial qualitative differences between the armed conflict practiced in more and less complex societies. War, in this view, emerged comparatively recently in human history and is exclusively a function of complex polities.

If these critics are of one voice in insisting that war is a restricted and recent phenomenon, they are divided over what kinds of complex polities practice war and

why. Taking a lead from the anthropologist Turney-High and military historians such as John Keegan, one view is that 'true' or 'real' war is associated with the emergence of a 'military horizon,' which in turn is a function of state-level technical and organizational complexity. In this view, non-state societies exist below the military horizon, their small scale, limited division of labor, and poor political centralization limiting the effectiveness of their weaponry, their logistical, strategic and tactical capacities, their ability to train and mobilize armed forces, and their ability to command and control these forces in the field resulting in limited and inefficient forms of fighting. In contrast, complex, hierarchically organized states exist above the 'military horizon,' their technological and organizational capacity transforming their fighting bodies into professionalized, sustainable, and exceedingly deadly forces. With these superior military capacities, moreover, war in societies above the military horizon assumes a qualitatively new orientation conduct: total and overwhelming victory, where necessary through genocidal war.

A second view holds that what is at issue in 'real' warfare is not so much its aims or deadliness as the nature of what it targets. In this view, war exists where lethal fighting has been socially appropriated – that is, removed from individual interests and actions and vested instead in social interests and social policy. For these critics, violent conflict in small scale societies should not be considered war because it is an individualized violence, motivated by feelings of personal involvement and aggression (e.g., to obtain wives, heads, or revenge) that one person or small party entertains towards another. War in this view is a function of larger, more complex polities, where the political community rather than the individual is the decisive agent. In 'true' warfare, many of those who fight do not know in detail why they are doing so, and they may harbor no personally aggressive or angry feelings towards their enemy.

Yet another view focuses not on the social appropriation of violence but on its outcomes: war should be reserved to define lethal conflict that is targeted *indiscriminately* on a social group. In contrast to the personalized forms of fighting that occur in "unsegmented" or "small-scale" societies, the primary and defining purpose of war is "to inflict serious injury or death on multiple unspecified members" of another community or to make it "highly likely" that such indiscriminate suffering will occur. Thus defined, critics contend, war is a function of "segmented", "complex," or "state" level society.

There are obvious, cross-cultural differences of scale and degree in human lethal combat, but these definitions assert that there are, in addition, *qualitative* differences. Unfortunately, the dividing lines they draw between war and other forms of collective lethal violence are empirically difficult to discern, and the claims they make about lethal fighting in small-scale communities are questionable. There is no obvious *qualitative* difference, for example, in the military technology and organization of societies that are claimed to be above or below the military horizon. To claim that only societies above the military horizon are motivated in combat by ideas of "total and overwhelming victory" is to ignore evidence that numerous small-scale societies also attempt militarily to annihilate their clan or tribal enemies or expel them from their territory. Although the claim is made that fighting in small-scale communities should not be considered war because it is an individualized affair, these claims usually add the coda that such

fighting may also involve a "small party" or a "person's kin group." This begs the question, though, of why fighting by a small party or kin group should not be considered a social appropriation of violence – and hence 'true' war. In some communities to which 'real' war is supposedly foreign, moreover, confrontations involve not only the individuals and kin groups directly involved in the dispute at issue but also other groups of kin and allies who join in moral support and even an occasional mercenary – a famed warrior hired specifically for his expertise. In 'tribal' societies, furthermore, the sizes of opposing forces can range from a few hundred to a few thousand warriors - hardly combat that can sensibly be characterized as individualized.

Definitional attempts to split combat in small-scale societies from that in more complex communities risk artificially dividing up what may be a unitary phenomenon. Collective lethal combat may be characterized by differences of scale and degree, but differences of kind are difficult to discern. At best, then, attempts to assert qualitative differences risk truncating and distorting attempts to understand the causes of war and the factors responsible for the evolution of its forms. At worst, they risk pacifying the past by definition. By insisting that small-scale societies do not have war, they too easily trivialize forms of lethal combat that in proportional terms can be just as deadly as that of more complex societies.

## 3. The Anthropology of War and Violence: A Brief History

In a historical review of the anthropology of war, Keith Otterbein identifies four main historical phases or periods. The first, the Foundation Period, began with the rise of modern anthropology and spanned the years from about 1850 to 1920. Although analytical interests in war during this era were limited mainly to fitting its development into the putative trajectories of cultural evolution that dominated the theoretical paradigms of the time, the period nonetheless presided over the formation of an early ethnographic record about warfare. The second or Classical Period, spanning the years from about 1920 to 1960, marked the subject's nadir, with minimal ethnographic attention directed to violence and war and hardly more to their analysis. This period of neglect ended around 1960, with the rise of the so-called Golden Age, which lasted until about 1980 and saw a dramatic expansion in ethnographic and analytical studies of lethal violence and a proliferation of theories about its causes and consequences. Finally, during the Recent Period from 1980 to the present, continuing research interest has seen a consolidation and integration of theories about war. As other scholars have noted, the most recent years of the Recent Period have also produced a broadening of the ethnographic subject to include ethnic violence, genocide, and terrorism, a rising interest in the anthropology of peace, and an analytical shift towards investigating the cultural meanings that inform violence and war.

Although it is an overstatement to claim that violence and war have been neglected in anthropology, it is still curious that the subject has not attracted more attention in view of its importance to humanity. Edward Burnett Tylor may have exaggerated the case when he stated in 1888 that, "after the quest for food, man's next great need is to defend himself" (reproduction is surely at least as important as both food and defense), but it is hardly hyperbole. Even today, though, when anthropological interest in war is as high as it ever has been, introductory textbooks that routinely include separate chapters on

economics, kinship, marriage, and religion, rarely spare a chapter – or even a section of a chapter - for war.

Several reasons have been proposed to explain the limited interest anthropologists have shown in violence and war, but the period between 1920 and 1960 appear to have been especially formative. During these years, most anthropology was focused on small-scale, uncentralized communities, and an influential image emerged of people in these societies as either essentially peaceful or as practicing no more than 'ritualized', game-like, or otherwise 'ineffective' forms of fighting in which casualties were limited and fatalities rare. This image was perhaps fostered or facilitated by interests of the time in functional models of small-scale societies, which emphasized the social continuity and functional harmony of social structures over the discontinuity and disruptions represented by war. Methodological influences were also at work. Fieldwork among these communities was almost always conducted decades after they had been conquered or otherwise 'pacified' by invaders or colonial powers. The peace under which they lived was thus an external imposition, but because the anthropological practice of the time was to analyze these communities as entities unto themselves – as social isolates – the effect was to sever their peacefulness from its historical context. To make matters worse, the methodological concept of the "ethnographic present" then served to transmute the community and its putative peacefulness into an enduring state 'beyond time.' Finally, it has been suggested, the 'romantic,' liberal, humanitarian outlook of most anthropologists has inclined them to downplay "mean" or "embarrassing" behavior among the people they study.

Whatever its source, the idea that some small-scale communities are essentially peaceable persists to the present. Since 1960, however, a contrary view has emerged that violence and war are as characteristic of small-scale, uncentralized communities as of nation states, and just as deadly if not more so. An important stimulus for this revisionist view was the growth of fieldwork in places such as New Guinea, the Amazon, and parts of Southeast Asia in small-scale communities that had only recently been pacified or, in a few cases, were still at war. Some analysts still presented this warfare as ineffective or 'ritualized,' designed to limit casualties or maintain populations in balance with resources (see War and Ecology, below). Others suggested that the intensity of the fighting was an artifact of contact (see War in the Tribal Zone, below). Yet others, however, have accepted what the evidence suggested, that deadly violence was a common feature of small-scale, uncentralized communities. In the 1980's, these scholars found reinforcement for their position in emerging evidence that wild chimpanzees practiced a primitive form of lethal ambush against conspecifics, a finding that allowed human collective violence to be placed within broader theoretical efforts to theorize the distribution of lethal violence across the species.

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**Biographical Sketch**

Paul ("Jim") Roscoe is a cultural anthropologist who has conducted two years of fieldwork in New Guinea, has an archival specialization in Ancient Polynesia, and specializes in political evolution and the anthropology of war. He has written about the origins of war, war and social organization, the evolution of the state, the origins of leadership and inequality, male and female initiation rites, the incest taboo, traditional art, and millenarian movements. He has authored articles in *American Anthropologist, American Ethnologist, Current Anthropology*, *The Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Man, The Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, *World Archaeology*, and other journals and edited volumes. With Nancy Lutkehaus, he edited *Gender Rituals: Female Initiation in Melanesia* (Routledge 1995), and with David Lipset, the edited volume *Echoes of the Tambaran*. He held the Lounsbery Fellowship at the American Museum of Natural History before joining the University of Maine. He holds a BSc in Physics, MSc in The Structure and Organization of Science and Technology in Society, and MA (Econ.) in Social Anthropology, all from the University of Manchester. He received his PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Rochester.