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The origins of war. Biological and anthropological theories.

The debate between nature and nurture, perhaps the longest-running controversy in the history of science, is still vigorous. Its two main battlegrounds have always been warfare and gender, two closely related subjects that raise so many interesting questions. The issue is complicated by the fact that in the twentieth century it has tended to become a war of the faculties, with biologists, including many biological anthropologists, on the side of nature and cultural and social anthropologists flocking to the banners of nurture.

The purpose of this abstract is to survey current theories in the natural and social sciences about the origin and functions of war, to bring these to the attention of a wider audience – particularly historians, whose discipline is traditionally more concerned with warfare than any other but poor in theories about it – and to suggest some tentative conclusions. This abstract surveys the history since the Enlightenment of the controversy over the origins and functions of warfare, focusing on the question of whether war is caused by nature or nurture. In the earlier literature five positions are distinguished.

1. The Hobbesian thesis: war is part of human nature and serves both the internal function of solidarity and the external function of maintaining the balance of power. Hobbes formulated thesis that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; second, diffidence; thirdly, glory. Hobbes, like most of the later Realists, sees only an external function in warfare. His state of war – actually a state of cold war – is totally anarchic and antisocial, but does serve the purpose of achieving gain, safety, and reputation, anticipating enemies to prevent imbalances and thereby maintaining the balance of power in one's own interest.
2. The Rousseauian thesis: war is not in human nature but was invented by states. Rousseau is rightly considered the philosopher of peace, as Hobbes is the philosopher of war, for he did more than anyone else to turn the golden age tradition to the uses of pacifism. Rousseau create an utopian model of what society should be. It is true that his pacifism remains negative and positive pessimistic. He did not hold out much hope for the abolition of war. His state of nature is an ideal standards not to be confused with social realities, and belief in it is a matter of faith rather the politics.
3. The Malthusian thesis: war serves the grand function of reducing population, quite apart from its conscious proximate functions. Thomas Malthus suggested that warfare has a higher function that is not intentional on the part of the human actors but is invisible to them. The function Malthus attributed to it is that warfare is part of the plan of God and nature to reduce excessive human population at necessary intervals. This theory had its classical antecedents. The ancient Stoics and Renaissance neo-Stoics had speculated that

warfare belongs to a providential scheme designed to keep populations from outgrowing their food supply.

4. The Spencerian thesis: a combination of Hobbes and Malthus-war serves the grand function of human evolution. Spencer was an opponent of the militarists and imperialists of his age. He retained the optimistic Enlightenment view of history as a rational unilinear progress and he was sure this progress led from the „egoistic” stage of „aboriginal man” to the „altruistic” stage of civilization. Progress had been triggered by warfare, but warfare had served its purpose and had become obsolete in modern society. In the long run it was the altruists who were the fittest and would survive.
5. The cultural anthropologists' thesis: an extreme version of Rousseau-war is a dysfunctional historical accident. The cultural determinists were highly skeptical about so-called laws of behavior which might limit the power and autonomy of culture. They especially did not believe that warfare performed any regular functions either proximate or grand. They tended to describe warfare as a relatively superficial adaptation or maladaptation, with the implication that it might easily be got rid of. Anthropologists continued to ignore the problem of the evolution of war, though the distinction between primitive and complex warfare seems to raise at once the question of how the second developed out the first.

There are three major theories connected to the recent controversies:

- sociobiology, an updated version of the Spencerian thesis;
- cultural ecology, an updated version of the cultural-anthropological thesis, combining Rousseau and Malthus;
- cultural Darwinism, which holds that the process of cultural evolution mimics natural selection.

Summing up, warfare has no grand functions, either sociobiological or ecological. War is neither nature nor nurture, but nurture imitating nature. Hobbes was right in thinking war has always been around; Rousseau was right to think primitive warfare was not the same thing as the wars of states. There has been in the course of human evolution a selection for aggressive behavior, not a biological selection but a cultural and political selection. Biology has not condemned us to war, but it is possible culture and politics may do so.