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In 2011, Steven Pinker published *The Better Angels of our Nature*, in which he poses a more than polemic thesis: that mankind, far from what many analysts assume, is currently experiencing a period of peaceful cooperation and prosperity, the likes of which humanity has never seen before. Not only is violence in decline, he asserts, but the establishment of free trade and multiculturalism, which is nourished by globalization, has paved the way for a something of a modern “Gilded Age” that has revitalized the cultural values of Enlightenment. While Pinker and other cultural theorists demonize conflict and war as tokens of degradation, immorality, and moral decline, Miguel Angel Centeno sees war as *a social fact*. According to his interpretation, society without war is simply inconceivable.

Miguel Angel Centeno has, over the years, contributed to the study of warfare and its effects on social organization. In his recently-released book, *War and Society*, co-authored with Elaine Enriquez, he examines war as a direct reflection of production, and the structuration of society. He asserts that the brutality and total destruction caused by war is indirectly proportional to the technological breakthrough it generates. War often leads to considerable innovative and invention—normally out of necessity during war time—that not only save lives but improves quality of life after the war. The fiscal efficiency often state develops, which consist in taxes, economic growth, and job opportunities, is determined by the abilities of states to face wars. Those nations which were not participating in wars developed a strange economic dependency respecting European powers.

In this context, Centeno and Henriquez ignite, in the introductory chapter, an interesting debate regarding the nature of violence and war. The authors take one step further the prevailing understanding of war—namely that it universally represents an act of aggression, albeit one codified into a set of rational norms and rules—asserting that war should be understood as *coalitionary aggression*, entirely oriented to impose a rationalized violence, both instrumental and premeditated, in an effort to achieve rational and specific goals. As a result, they say, war enacts a deep collective solidarity (within both in- and out-groups).

People committed in battle are not necessarily sadist or blood thirsty; they follow rational orders (given by their superiors) that they execute alongside other soldiers, ultimately forging a collective spirit; the violence is punctuated by rules, protocols, and institutions. As such, say Centeno and Enriquez, war should be discussed as a sort of social object. At the outset, the authors trace biological explanations for war that hark back to its sociological roots. By introducing different conceptual approaches, the authors agree that although aggression may be individually instinctive in the human mind, the professionalization of war started only once nomadic groups became sedentary cultures. The quest for territory, surplus, and profit—resulting from the agricultural revolution, which permitted previously nomadic cultures to settle in one geographic region—were key factors that perfected the techniques of the war-machine that operates within human society. War is human in essence, as well as a vehicle for enhancing the productive system during crises.

Despite the authors’ confident reframing of the nature of war, they concede that unpacking the human proclivity toward violence remains more difficult to tackle. They assert that ultimately, neither the pursuit of financial gains nor the desire for cultural dominance is enough to explain the fundamental nature of conflict. There is no conclusive evidence that proves mankind is innately driven to competition and violence, as Hobbesian scholars might argue. And neither are we, as Pinker asserted, divinely created to cultivate the peace. Centeno and Henriquez depart from the premise that war and peace are two sides of the same coin. From this stance, Centeno and Henriquez accept that “wars happen not because cultures push

us toward them but because cultural prohibitions against violence are lowered and identification of the threat leads to an acceptance of it” (p. 25).

The second chapter explores the experiences and expectation of warriors as well as the military organization involved in battle. This particularly, for this reviewer, is the most interesting part of the book, in which concepts such as discipline, leadership, and military values such as courage, honor, and duty are placed under the critical lens of scrutiny. The third chapter, “War of Armies,” continues some of the previously-settled points from earlier sections of the book. Centeno and Henriquez elucidate the development (as the result of war) of new technologies that articulate novel forms of organizations and shape modern economies. The main entry in this discussion appears to be that fighting individually is different than fighting among groups. While the former allows the adoption of individual skills, the latter requires collective hierarchies that are organized according to *institutional structures*. In this way, as Centeno and Henriquez argue, wars trigger different forms of organization and adaptation that deserve to be studied. Still further, the fourth and fifth chapters assess not only the design of wars but also their effects on the economic productive system.

The research presented by Centeno and Enriquez confronts a set of prejudices and stereotypes regarding warfare while offering a fresh perspective on the human propensity toward war. Equally important, the authors assert, in the years to come, societies shall face a paradoxical situation because the cultural background of violence has changed. As the authors say:

We believe that the state of war in the twenty-first century presents yet another paradox in our study of the link between social structure and organized violence. On the one hand, we are living through something that could be called a world war, in that practically every region is affected by at least violent threats if not a great deal of killing and destruction. On the other, the majority of humanity does not live in a state of war (p. 146)

The book brings the social nature of war to the foreground, discussing the negative and positive aftermath and effects of war on culture and society. Miguel Angel Centeno and his colleague Elaine Henriquez successfully present a high quality work that makes a considerable contribution to the anthropological study of war. This essential reading is recommended for social scientists interested in war as a primary object of study.

Reference

Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: The decline of violence in history and its causes*. London: Penguin UK.

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