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Why do wars happen?

The question in our title has been posed in many ways and for a very long time. It occupies the thoughts of pacifists and peace researchers as much as strategists and political-science hawks.

Few have been able to transcend Carl Von Clausewitz's definition of war (Sharma, 2015), even if his use of the first-person plural is troubling: '*War is... an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will*' (Von Clausewitz, 1989, p. 75); 'war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means' (Von Clausewitz, 1989, p. 87). Hobbes maintained that: the causes of war and desolation proceed from those passions, by which we strive to accommodate ourselves, and to leave others as far as we can behind us: it followeth that that passion by which we strive mutually to accommodate each other, must be the cause of peace. (1640)

In their famous correspondence *Why War?* Freud and Einstein agreed (1932). For Michael Howard, wars were understood for centuries as 'an aberration in human affairs

... an occurrence beyond rational control' and latterly as effects of masculinity, class greed, or evolutionary necessity (1984). So let's examine the dominant academic *données*. Institutionalist political science identifies 'power theories, power transition theories, the relationship between economic interdependence and war, diversionary theories of conflict, domestic coalitional theories, and the nature of decision-making under risk and uncertainty' (Levy, 1998). The development economist Frances Stewart (2002) advises that:

- The incidence of war has been rising since 1950, with most wars being within states
- Wars often have cultural dimensions related to ethnicity or religion, but there are invariably underlying economic causes too
- Major root causes include political, economic, and social inequalities; extreme poverty; economic stagnation; poor government services; high unemployment; environmental degradation; and individual (economic) incentives to fight

The feminist strand of international relations theory stresses the significance of gender in the causes of war, emphasizing these factors at structural and interpersonal levels, from both the world system to internal dynamics within nations, and the masculine priorities and personalities that drive conflicts (Sjoberg, 2013).

The Royal Geographical Society nominates 'land disputes, politics, religious and cultural differences and the distribution and use of resources.'¹ The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research database finds that ideological struggle is a source of most wars, but there is rarely one cause of disputes.² Quantoid neoliberals advise that [t]here are two prerequisites for a

war between (rational) actors. One is that the costs of war cannot be overwhelmingly high ... there must be some plausible situations in the eyes of the decision makers such that the anticipated gains from a war in terms of resources, power, glory, territory, and so forth exceed the expected costs of conflict ... Without this prerequisite there can be lasting peace ... Second, ... there has to be a failure in bargaining, so that for some reason there is an inability to reach a mutually advantageous and enforceable agreement. (Jackson & Morelli, 2011).

This decontextualized game theory, founded on rational action and a capitalist consumer mentality, dominates the deracinated world of mainstream political science – the reductive, selfish side to rationality (Altman, 2015; Meadwell, 2015). Psychological explanations have also been diminished to these game-theoretical assumptions and artificial experiments (Böhm, Rusch, & Güreker, 2015), while cliometricians, too, are subject to the warlockcraft's imposing spells (Eloranta, 2016; Jenke & Gelpi, 2016).

Such approaches are all part of the warfare/welfare service mentality of US and north- ern European social science. In the case of war, we see such forms of life adopted and encouraged by technocrats and militarists alike (Roxborough, 2015). In short, mainstream social science and diplomacy are wedded to the notion that 'war between states is to be seen in terms of rationally decided aggression rather than in the internationalization of social conflict' (Halliday, 1990, p. 207).

Contra these perspectives, we confront J.A. Hobson's (1902) ideas about imperialism driven by the capitalist problem of over-production; Marxist theories of class war caused by unequal control of the means of production; Maoist arguments about the peasantry versus the urban working class as motors of revolutionary change; and postcolonial insights into the wars that derive from decolonizing cartography.

Keynes (1936) provides a succinct political-economic explanation: War has several causes. Dictators and others such, to whom war offers, in expectation at least, a pleasurable excitement, find it easy to work on the natural bellicosity of their peoples. But, over and above this, facilitating their task of fanning the popular flame, are the economic causes of war, namely, the pressure of population and the competitive struggle for markets.

This is the world that Dwight D. Eisenhower so memorably condemned in his exit speech as US President (1972): 'the military-industrial complex.' Fifty years on, we can discern this complex as the 'single most successful system of wealth transfer ever devised – moving tens of billions of dollars every year from ordinary taxpayers into the pockets of big defense contractors and their allies in Congress' (Marshall, 2016).

It is hard to argue against a logic of the system and its parthenogenesis, as per Eisenhower's compelling insight; hard to argue against an understanding that ideology, gender, and decision-making also play their part. But when we look at conflicts across the globe, it is crucial also to include, perhaps to prioritize, the seemingly endless hangover of imperialism and colonialism, the divisions, alliances, cultures, and cartographies that they left behind and continue to foster. Or is it fester?

Notes

1. <http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Teaching±resources/Key±Stage±3±resources/The±geography±of±conflict/The±causes±of±conflict.htm>.
2. http://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2014.pdf.

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