

Anthropology and the study of war

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While anthropologists have filled many museum cases with weapons, they have given but scant attention to the organization, causes, concomitants, and consequences of war. And yet these are matters important for anthropologists to investigate — important not only because war itself has been important in the lives of people from very early times, but also because anthropologists, accustomed to viewing phenomena in a cross-cultural, non-ethnocentric evolutionary perspective, have special contributions to make to the study of war.

The papers that follow were presented originally as part of an anthropological symposium on warfare,* and they give some indication of the kinds of contributions to be made and the kinds of problems to be dealt with. The evolutionary and cross-cultural perspective leads the authors of the papers to see beyond transient psychological states or the particular microscopic social situations generating hostilities. Instead, the authors concern themselves with such matters as the role of warfare in the successive transformations of human (and subhuman) societies, the relation between types of fighting or war and types of ecological conditions, and the relation between war and either social organization or social disorganization.

The last matter is discussed perhaps most explicitly by Scott, the only one of the three authors who is not an anthropologist. Similar issues, however, are being treated in a growing body of anthropological literature, which includes such provocative recent contributions as the work of Max Gluckman and his associates. A particular concern of these students has

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been the role that war and other forms of social conflict may have in maintaining or restoring socio-political systems rather than in disrupting them (cf. Gluckman 1954; Worsley 1961).

Consideration of these issues leads to consideration of other ones. The attribution of particular functions to warfare — whether the maintenance of socio-political systems or, as Suttles suggests, the adaptive spacing out of human populations — leads to questions about whether there are functional alternatives to warfare. Under what conditions is spacing out, for example, achieved by witchcraft (cf. Bohannan 1954: 13, 15) or by relatively bloodless ritualized fighting rather than by sanguinary war? To answer such questions, the anthropologist again has the advantage of his cross-cultural and evolutionary perspective. At the same time, he has the possibility of getting needed information, often unavailable in the existing literature, by doing the field work commonly regarded as a hallmark of the anthropological approach. Thus the anthropologist can go to places where the cessation of tribal warfare has been fairly recent and there he can investigate what adjustments have been made, what functional alternatives (if any) to warfare have been developed. Through field work in a carefully selected sample of societies in such areas as Melanesia and tropical Africa, it should be possible to test and perhaps reformulate the various hypotheses to the effect that feasting (cf. Codere 1950: chap. 6; Oliver 1955: 471) or sorcery (cf. Berndt 1957: 50; Maher 1961: 53, 92) or games (cf. Stern 1950: 96-97) or something else can become a substitute for warfare. For the more adventurous anthropologist, it may be possible to contribute to the study of war by doing field work even in some region where warfare is actually going on. It is obviously impossible for us in a brief introductory statement such as this to indicate the entire range of significant contributions that anthropologists might make to the study of war. It is our hope, however, that our introductory statement and the papers that follow will succeed at least in conveying that there is a great deal indeed for anthropologists to do in this whole area of inquiry.

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