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Book Review

Coulomb, Fanny. 2004. *Economic Theories of Peace and War*. Studies in Defence Economics series. London: Routledge, viii + 308 pp. ISBN 0-415-28408-2 (hardback). Price £75.00.

by Bjørn Møller (5 May 2006)

This is a notable introduction to war and peace elements in economic theories, from the very beginnings of the discipline to the present day. A major part of the work is thus devoted to mercantilism, physiocrats, and early liberal economists such as Malthus, Ricardo, and James and John Stuart Mill. Yet, rather surprisingly, almost nothing is said on Adam Smith. The book is based on a meticulous reading of the classics and is a valuable antidote to prevalent stereotypes such as those of “bellicose mercantilists” as opposed to “pacific liberalists.” Even though there are significant differences between French and British mercantilist theories – the former emphasizing self-sufficiency at the expense of trade, the latter seeing foreign trade as indispensable for national security – the author shows that in fact most mercantilists (and liberalists, for that matter) regarded war as a distraction from economic endeavors for the common good and from the needs of the nascent state.

The work covers not only the general view of economists on the war-versus-peace issue, but also their more specific economically based recommendations with regard to the structure of the armed forces. The leading physiocrat, Jean-Baptiste Say, for instance, argued in favor of a defensive orientation, whereas others recommend more offensive military postures.

A long chapter is devoted to heterodox theories, including not only Marxism but also its predecessors such as “utopian socialists” Fourier and Owen and their competitors as ideologues of the working class, i.e., anarchist thinkers such as Proudhon and Bakunin. The account of classical Marxism (which generally held capitalism to be bellicose) is followed by a survey of such authors as Lenin and Rosa Luxembourg, who agreed with this assessment, and of “revisionists” such as Kautsky and his theory of a largely peaceful “ultraimperialism.”

Around a third of the book is devoted to modern, post-1945, economic thinking on war and peace-related issues. This is organized around themes such as the arms race and economic warfare, for which it offers a comprehensive, if far from exhaustive, account, aptly recording and comparing the various theories. The main focus is on the international dimension, i.e., wars and preparations for war between states, but little is said on armed conflict within states and the rich and rapidly growing economic literature on this topic.

All things considered, this is a very useful and valuable reference work of almost encyclopedic scope. One wonders whether it might not have been even more useful if the author had opted for the format of an encyclopedia, with entries on the various economic thinkers and themes, accompanied by cross-references.

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