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Book Review

Gat, Azar. 2006. *War in Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, xv + 822 pp. ISBN: 0-19-926213-6 (hardback). Price: £25.00.

by Bjørn Møller (30 March 2008)

A monumental, magisterial book, this work of around 840 pages covers a time span of about three millennia, covers all continents and deals with phenomena as general as war and human civilization and their relationship to each other. Very well written, its special use of chronology is convincing: generalizing about societies at comparable levels of development, irrespective of their actual simultaneity.

Part one covers the first two million years of human civilization, that is, various hunter-gatherer civilizations about which our knowledge is limited, based mainly on archaeology and occasional cave paintings. In the absence of written sources, the author uses the opportunity to critically survey extant theories regarding the human propensity for intraspecific violence and war, ranging from classics such as Hobbes and Rousseau, via biologists and psychologists such as Konrad Lorenz, to modern anthropologists such as Margaret Mead. The main finding is that our ancestors did indeed fight what might be called wars, typically over women and/or scarce natural resources and, by implication, over territory. Although population density was very low, this did not preclude wars over territory. The most valuable land attracted people, thus “recreating the same tenuous ratio of subsistence that has been the fate of most preindustrial societies throughout human history” (p. 32). According to the author, there really were no empty spaces for people to move to: leaving familiar habitat was too risky, an argument that runs counter to for instance to Jeffrey Herbst’s theories about why Africa did not develop states in the precolonial period (namely that people always had the option of evading taxation through migration). As productivity increased, it began to make “sense” to enslave others; this produced additional grounds for war as a means of wealth accumulation. And as human communities grew larger, wars also began to be fought for immaterial values such as ethnicity and religion, yet were almost always related to the distribution of scarce material resources. One scarce resource was women, partly due to the prevalence of female infanticide. Wars over women were one consequence, a phenomenon recently theorized by Valerie Hudson and Andrea Den Boer in their book, *Bare Branches*.

The second part of the book, labeled *Agraria and Pastoralia*, is devoted to agricultural societies. Large-scale warfare made its appearance, for example between large civilizations such as those of Egypt or Mesopotamia, over territory, water, and — as far as nomadic peoples were concerned — resource access. As a general rule, nomadic pastoralists were more prone to go to war than sedentary farmers. More importantly, within both groups, a division of labor developed between warriors and “civilians,” with the former enjoying wealth accumulation advantages, thereby often ensuring their supremacy in terms of power as well. Based on the gradual and partial monopolization of the implements of violence, but also on the ability to tax the population, this helped pave the way for the emergence of the state as a political entity. While wars were waged for its spoils, rarely were wars economically beneficial. Indeed, according to Gat, “the advent of farming and accumulated

property almost invariably meant an overall net loss of resources,” even though one side (usually the victor) might still gain from it.

The book’s third part addresses the early and late modern era with partly industrialized societies and strong states able to centralize control over societal resources. This produced a quantum leap in terms of the scale and destructiveness of war. The author here takes the opportunity to scrutinize a variety of theories of war with independent variables such as trade, economic interdependence, and political regime type. He is generally skeptical about these theories, pointing, for example, to the fact that free trade did not eliminate wars but rather may have caused them in the name of “the imperialism of free trade” (p. 546). But whereas wars were indeed fought over empire, for instance, during the infamous Scramble for Africa in the late 19th century, the possession of vast colonial empires did little or nothing to promote economic growth or wealth in the imperialist countries.

Even though the work does not break much new theoretical ground, certainly not in terms of Grand Theory, it does a lot to put the available theories to the historical test.

In sum, this is a highly recommended book.

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