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THE BIOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

The problem of violence has long occupied a central place in the study of human nature. From the philosophical reflections of Hobbes and Schmitt to the anthropological and neurobiological insights of Lorenz and Girard, violence emerges as a fundamental, multidimensional phenomenon that bridges the biological and the socio-political. The tendency toward aggression and conflict is not merely a product of external conditions or ideological confrontation, but rather an intrinsic feature of human existence - a mechanism that has historically served both survival and self-destruction. Understanding violence, therefore, requires a synthesis of perspectives: anthropology reveals its evolutionary origins, political theory explores its institutionalization, and psychology uncovers its neural and emotional roots. Within this framework, war appears not only as a political instrument but also as an expression of deeply embedded biological drives that shape human identity, social cohesion, and the very foundations of political order.

Keywords: Violence; Political Order; Human Nature; Sovereignty; Evolutionary Theory; Political Anthropology; Biopolitics; Power and Coercion.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of violence serves as a fundamental bridge between our evolutionary past and our institutionalized present. While classical International Relations theories debate whether war is a result of human nature (Realism) or systemic instability (Liberalism), anthropological perspectives suggest it is a complex intersection of both biology and culture. From the instinctive drives identified by Konrad Lorenz to the "friend-enemy" distinctions of Carl Schmitt, violence emerges not just as destruction, but as a mechanism for social integration and political identity

MAIN PART

The anthropological aspect of violence

War, as the extreme form of violence aimed at achieving a desired outcome, has remained an object of study for humanity for centuries. What causes one person or group to violently attack another person or group? The debate about this continues to this day. For instance, Realism and Liberalism, from the classical theories of International Relations, offer different explanations for the origins of war: For Realists, war is inevitable due to human nature (Morgenthau) and the anarchical nature of the international system (Waltz), which compels states to fight for survival and to maintain power. For Liberals, war is the result of the instability of the political and institutional system. It arises between non-democratic actors who refuse economic integration and international cooperation based on common rules. In short, for Realists, "man is a wolf to man" (Homo homini lupus) by nature, while for Liberals, "man is an end in himself and not a means" (Kant).

The anthropological theory of the genesis of war, on the other hand, paints a different picture, suggesting that war is not merely a political-economic confrontation between states, but one of the most complex collective forms of human biological nature and culture.

For anthropology, war is a space where humans, as a biological species, were shaped over millions of years in a competitive ecological environment. This means that aggression and territorial defense became essential survival mechanisms from the beginning, since aggression is a natural behavior in humans and other animals, aimed at protecting resources

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and ensuring reproductive opportunities. For example, Konrad Lorenz wrote in his work (Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression, 1963): "Aggressive behavior belongs to the same class of instinctive drives as hunger and love; it has the same vital function of the preservation of the species[4]".

In Lorenz's view, aggression in the behavior of animals and humans is not merely destruction, but also a means of restoring homeostasis (internal balance). However, when this instinct is not culturally controlled, it transforms into collective violence - that is, war[5]. For instance, the Yanomamö tribe (an Amazonian tribe) studied by Napoleon Chagnon existed precisely on this principle: the status, prestige, and access to resources for men are directly linked to their participation in warfare. "Bloodshed for them is not simply a conflict, but a social mechanism that determines who will live and who will have children[6]."

Thus, evolutionarily, war can be perceived as a selective filter - groups that were better organized and more effectively utilized collective violence were better able to survive. Contemporary neuropsychology shows that aggressive behavior is closely linked to specific brain regions:

Amygdala: This brain structure is crucial for the perception of fear and threat, as well as the generation of defensive and aggressive reactions. Neuroimaging studies indicate that amygdala activation increases when an individual perceives hostile or dangerous stimuli[7]. In the context of war, the amygdala processes the "enemy" signal and prepares the organism for a defensive or offensive reaction.

Hypothalamus: This structure serves as the physiological generator of aggressive behavior. Experiments on animals have shown that electrical stimulation of the hypothalamus induces attacking behavior, indicating its role in instinctive aggression[8] .

[4] Lorenz Konrad, On Aggression, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966, p. 40
[5] Ibid., pp. 247-250
[6] N. A. Yanomamö Chagnon,: The Fierce People. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, pp. 29–35
[7] Davis, M., and P. J. Whalen. “The Amygdala: Vigilance and Emotion.” Molecular Psychiatry 6, no. 1 (2001): 13–34
[8] W. R. Hess, “Über Diencephale Sympathicusaktionen.” Schweizer Archiv für Neurologie und Psychiatrie 23 (1928): 33–52

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Prefrontal Cortex: This area is responsible for regulating impulse and emotional control[9]. Under conditions of intense stress or collective aggression (e.g., in war), the functioning of the prefrontal cortex decreases, resulting in reduced self-control and an increase in instinctive, emotionally-driven behavior[10].

Consequently, an individual involved in war often no longer acts as an independent entity - their biological systems shift to a group mode, where emotional engagement and aggression are mobilized at an instinctive level.

Evolutionary psychology has shown that two seemingly opposite forms of human behavior - altruism and aggression - may stem from the same underlying biological and genetic mechanisms. The works of Edward O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins laid the foundation for an approach suggesting that social behaviors (including aggressive and defensive actions) can be explained by natural selection and strategies for gene survival.

Edward O. Wilson, in his work Sociobiology: The New Synthesis (1975), argued that aggression and altruism are evolutionarily shaped behavioral forms that serve the survival of the group or genetic kin[11]. Aggression is essential for securing resources and safety, while altruism is necessary for maintaining social coexistence and collective stability.

Richard Dawkins, in The Selfish Gene, proposed a theory that altruistic behavior is a manifestation of the gene's selfish interest - meaning an individual may sacrifice themselves if it increases the survival chance of the genes they share with their relatives[12].

Consequently, evolutionary psychology views aggression and altruism not as a moral opposition, but as two sides of a genetic strategy that function within a unified system of biological survival[13].

The biological mechanisms indicate that war did not emerge solely from political-economic motivations. It is deeply rooted in the human nervous, hormonal, and

[9] R. J. R. Blair, “The Roles of Orbital Frontal Cortex in the Modulation of Antisocial Behavior.” Brain and Cognition 55, no. 1 (2004): 198–208)
[10] Adrian Raine, The Anatomy of Violence: The Biological Roots of Crime. New York: Vintage, 2018
[11] Edward O. Wilson, Sociobiology: The New Synthesis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975
[12] Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976
[13] Steven Pinker, The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined. New York: Viking, 2011

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evolutionary systems. War, from this perspective, is the social integration of instincts - an organized, culturally justified form of natural aggression. Thus, from the perspective of biological anthropology, war is a human evolutionary legacy that reflects instincts for group survival, domination, and the defense of resources. Its mechanisms are connected to the brain's aggressive and social cohesion zones, hormonal changes, and genetic survival strategies. However, the development of culture has given these instincts a new form - war has transformed into an organized political instrument. Therefore, overcoming war requires not only political but also biological consciousness transformation - shifting the instinct of aggression towards cooperation and empathy.

The Socio-Political Essence of Violence

"Within identity theory, an identity is a **set of meanings defining who one is** in a role (e.g., father, plumber, student), in a group or social category (e.g., member of a church or voluntary association, an American, a female), or a unique individual... Our identities **tie us as individuals to the groups, the social categories, and the roles that make up society**. Identities are the **link between the individual and society or social structure**"[14]. Over time, the criteria for social identity have diversified, encompassing not only an individual's affiliation with a particular social group but also **negative criteria**[15]. This perspective posits that the establishment of an "alien" identity is requisite for political unity, which inherently stands in contrast to the group's own sense of self.

Both **Carl Schmitt**, with his "friend-enemy" distinction, and **Samuel Huntington**, in *The Clash of Civilizations*, argue for this inherent requirement. Huntington, for instance, views the existence of a "foreign culture" or "civilization" as a critical marker for the political cohesion of a people, serving as the basis upon which the first civilization defines its own political boundary[16]. In essence, “social identities are constructed as differential, that is, the

[14] Peter J. Burke, “Identity,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory*, ed. Peter Kivisto. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 60
[15] Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour.” *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986, 7-24
[16] Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996

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existence of externality, or of 'the Other' is fundamental to their establishment… The "Us" of equivalent social demands meets … the "Their" naked power. Identity is here construed in mutual relation of two universalities ('our' equivalence against 'their' naked power)[17]." Such groups are commonly designated in political discourse using terms like **enemy**, **opponent**, **stranger**, or **competitor**.

Carl Schmitt introduced the concept of **the political** (German: *das Politische*), defining the **friend-enemy dichotomy** as "the fundamental principle to which all political actions and motives of people return"[18] . Observing modern political dynamics, particularly in the context of information warfare, the construction of an enemy image serves as a powerful mechanism to galvanize the masses against opposing states or social factions. Furthermore, in contemporary political reality, the image of the enemy functions as a tool for **group identity formation** that integrates and unifies society. As Umberto Eco aptly noted, "Having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one"[19].

A significant conceptual challenge arises because, in modern political discourse, the term "**enemy**" often carries a **propagandistic connotation** and is frequently perceived as absolute evil. However, Schmitt carefully distinguished the **political enemy** (*hostis*) from the **personal enemy** (*inimicus*). A political enemy, according to Schmitt, "The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible"[20]. Importantly, the "enemy" is not restricted

[17] Jerzy Janiszewski, "Semiotics of Identity: Politics and Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 5 (2011): 510
[18] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 26
[19] Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. by Richard Dixon (Boston & New York: Mariner Books, 2013), 2
[20] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, in *Democracy: A Reader*, ed. Ricardo Blaug and John Schwarzmantel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 245–46.

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to a specific person or collective entity such as a state, civilization, or organization; an "enemy" can also manifest as an abstract **idea**. The "**face of the enemy**" is the qualitative (evaluative) image formed in the public consciousness and interpreted by that society as an opponent to its own unity and identity.

Schmitt, much like **Thomas Hobbes**, grounds people's social reactions in the "**fear of the stranger**," which Schmitt ultimately designates as the "enemy". Consequently, for Schmitt, the fundamental *raison d'être* of the state and politics is encapsulated in the maxim: ***protego ergo obligo*** (Latin: "I defend, therefore I obey"), which he considers the *cogito* for the state[21]. This perspective establishes the existentially alien stranger/enemy as the sole phenomenon against which the use of **coercion** is deemed **legitimate** within a legal state. Intuitively, the concept of the "enemy" itself implies that the application of violence against them is permissible. Thus, the phenomenon of the enemy is foundational for introducing the definitions of "**violence**" into political discourse.

Social Order, Anomie, and the Institutionalization of Violence

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, **Peter Berger** and Thomas Luckmann describe humans as world-creators and social beings, positing that human nature is fundamentally rooted in a desire for a **socially constructed order**[22]. The authors argue that the "I" is externalized by its very essence: "The totality of human externalizations creates society, which becomes an objective reality and, in turn, affects the individual"[23] . According to Berger and Luckmann, society and the individual are engaged in a **dialectical, self-perpetuating relationship** that serves as a collective defense against **anomie** (chaos)[24]. Nevertheless, these human-created social constructions are perpetually vulnerable, often due to the "self-interest and stupidity" of their creators. Therefore, this established order

[21] Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. by G.L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 13
[22] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), 61
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 72

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necessitates supporting **institutions** that can foster a **non-conflictual** (non-violent) environment in the relations between the individual and society[25]

Émile Durkheim's term *anomie* finds an equivalent in political science through Hobbes' definition of the **"state of nature"**. The essential difference between the state of nature (anomie) and civil order, in Hobbes' view, lies in the problem of the **freedom to use violence**[26]. Hobbes argues that in the state of nature, the main rule is **"the war of all against all,** meaning a "free" person is driven by private interests, which are most effectively realized through war or the unrestrained use of violence[27] . He famously describes the life of individuals under the primacy of universally applicable and freely available violence as: " And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"[28]. Consequently, Hobbes concludes that any human association, motivated by the **fear of violence**, "aspires to rise above the state of nature and create civil society (order)"[29]. This creation implies the surrender of individuals' freedom to use violence for personal gain, thereby establishing universal peace.

Violence is, of course, not entirely eliminated; as Schmitt noted, "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and this antagonism is an inseparable feature of human existence"[30]. Therefore, the critical difference is that violence becomes **institutionalized** under the conditions of social order, with the ruling elite establishing a **monopoly on legitimate coercion**.

The problem of violence in social relations was deeply explored by the philosopher **René Girard**. The French thinker defined violence as: "Violence is generated by this process; or rather violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object of their desire."[31] Girard's starting premise is that human desires and the means to achieve them are **mimetic**. He shared **Gabriel Tarde's** insight that

[25] Ibid., p. 61
[26] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), Ch. XIII, 89–90
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid. Ch. XIII, 89
[29] Ibid. Ch. XVII, 116–17
[30] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 28
[31] Rene Girard, Interview: Rene Girard. Diacritics, 1978, 8.1

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the foundation of culture rests on the human capacity to imitate. However, Girard emphasized that this imitation yields both constructive results and negative manifestations, as mimesis also operates in the realm of violence[32]. The philosopher posited that **mimetism** applies primarily to the subject's desires: an individual, by imitating a peer, primarily learns to desire the objects that the other wants[33]. When desires converge on the same objects, which are often limited in quantity, **competition** for scarce resources ensues.

Girard suggested that the function of religion, particularly its rituals, is to avert this violent rivalry through **controlled violence** (coercion). In other words, society requires the prevention of chaotically spreading, uncontrollable, and mimetic violent disagreements among people for its own survival. According to Girard, religion recognized the phenomenon that **"ritualized"** (controlled and purposeful) coercion is a factor that **unifies society** and restrains violence within the group[34].

While Girard's analysis of religion's role as a deterrent to violence is innovative, he is not the first to acknowledge the importance of coercion for social stability. In classical political theory, this tradition is associated with **Hobbes, Boulainville, and Clausewitz**-three figures whom **Michel Foucault** examined in *Society Must Be Defended* during his study of the problem of social order[35]. Foucault connected these thinkers in the discourse on violence and hypothesized that institutionalized (or, in Girard's terminology, "ritualized") coercion is a force that **produces and maintains order**. Accordingly, the political sphere and its central signifier, **political identity**, are inextricably intertwined with the phenomenon of violence. For example, as scholar Maxim Lipatov asserts: "Political violence is an ideologically defined and materially supported activity of classes, nations,

[32] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 25
[33] René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 44
[34] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 28–29.
[35] Michel Foucault, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, Francois Ewald and David Macey, Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France, 1975–1976. New York: Picador, 1st ed., 2003

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social groups, and social institutions aimed at using coercive means to gain or maintain state power, which, in turn,... governs internal social processes"[36].

CONCLUSION

Violence and war, when viewed through anthropological, biological, and political lenses, transcend mere political or economic explanation. They express humanity's dual nature-instinctively aggressive yet capable of empathy and moral reflection. From Hobbes's "war of all against all" to Kant's moral imperative that "man is an end in himself," the intellectual history of violence reveals an enduring tension between destructive instincts and ethical evolution. Modern neuroscience confirms that aggression is biologically embedded in the human brain, while cultural consciousness offers the potential to transform it.

Overcoming war and institutionalized violence, therefore, requires more than diplomatic reform; it demands an evolution of human awareness. Only by redirecting the biological instinct for aggression toward empathy, cooperation, and shared identity can humanity transcend its evolutionary legacy of conflict and realize the moral vision of peace.

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