14.

Why War – Still?

Albert Meets Sigmund in the Utimate Match-Up

Toby Miller[1]

Abstract

After reviewing various theories of why wars occur, notably feminist, postcolonial and political-economic perspectives, this chapter takes a moment from long ago as its touchstone: a venerable debate about why war happens. It took place in correspondence 85 years ago between two founders of masculinist modernity: Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud. Their debate offers us some clues about how technocracy and masculinity meet in metaphorical trenches, and what journalism should do to cover that encounter.

Keywords: Einstein, Freud, causes of war, journalism

Introduction

Few historians, strategists, or political scientists 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 in its certitude about the universal desire for power. Von Clausewitz said: "War is … an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (1989: 75). He avowed that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political Instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means" (1989:87).[2]

Why do we have such conflicts? Michael Howard summarised the principal arguments thirty years ago: wars have been understood for centuries as "an aberration in human affairs … an occurrence beyond rational control", and more recently as effects of masculinity, class greed or evolutionary necessity (1984). Those accounts still resonate, but we have some newer ones.

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, mostly within rather than between states

- Wars are often prompted by race and religion, but have underlying economic causes as well

- The principal stimuli to war include political, economic, and social inequality; extreme poverty; economic stagnation; poor government services; high unemployment; environmental degradation; and individual (economic) incentives to fight

The Royal Geographical Society nominates "land disputes, politics, religious and cultural differences and the distribution and use of resources" as causes, while the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research database finds that ideological struggle is a source of most wars, generally nested with other factors.[3] Quantoid neoliberals advise that:

> There 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 decontextualised game theory, founded on rational action as defined by a capitalist consumer mentality, dominates the deracinated world of mainstream political science – the reductive, selfish side of rationality (Altman 2015; Meadwell 2016). Psychological explanations have also been diminished to game-theoretical assumptions and their cosily artificial experiments (Böhm et al. 2015). Cliometricians, too, are subject to this warlockcraft's imposing spells (Eloranda 2016; Jenke & Gelpi 2016).

These approaches form part of the warfare/welfare service mentality that colours US and northern 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 academia 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 internationalisation of social conflict" (Halliday 1990: 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; feminist critiques of masculine violence; and postcolonial insights into wars that derive from decolonising cartography (Gruffydd Jones 2006).

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.

Wherever you look, from diplomats to bombadiers to correspondents, war is an implicitly male activity. This is rarely if ever recognised in mainstream media coverage and academic knowledge, or problematised as such (Sjoberg 2013; Ackerly et al. 2006; Hearn 2012). The astonishing inequality between men and women, in socioeconomic power and cultural representation alike, relies on the threat and the actuality of violence to undergird it, as exemplified in the fact that so many more men than women bear arms, both outside and within the military. Violence between men is also important in determining who among them obtains the spoils of this gendered dominance, and as an index of, and displacement from, other crises such as perceived economic disadvantage (Connell 2005: 82-83). The claim that women are naturally nurturing or pacific has not stood up to a multitude of counter-examples, from feminist guerrilla to women who are violent to children (Rayas Velasco 2009; Enloe 1983; Feinman 2000). But this violence is in no way symmetrical with male militarism. The feminist strand of international relations theory stresses the significance of gender in the causes of war, emphasising these factors at structural and interpersonal levels, from across the world system to internal dynamics within nations, including the masculine priorities and personalities that drive conflicts. The quest for feminist explanations of and interventions into the gendered pattern of war continues, especially given the way that women's vulnerability is frequently invoked as a justification for conflicts, even as they suffer from the violence that ensues in specific ways (Riley et al. 2008; Mackie 2012).

Drawing on these latter approaches, this chapter takes a moment from long ago as its textual touchstone: a venerable debate about why war happens. For having reviewed the theories listed above, and finding myself compelled by feminist, postcolonial and political-economic perspectives, I am drawn to a correspondence from eighty-five years ago between two founders of masculinist modernity: Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud.

Together, the two men stand as emblems of powerful and very male discourses – one of mastering the universe, the other of mastering the self. Those quests for mastery continue today. Einstein's and Freud's discussion of war is largely forgotten now, but I think it can shed light on this volume's deliberations in terms of the causes of collective conflict, the perils of technological rationality, the masculinist presumptions that undergird war and its representation, and an emergent guidance on how to report it.

The correspondence

In 1932, just prior to the fateful, fatal triumph of national socialism in Germany, Einstein was invited by the League of Nations Paris-based International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, a precursor to UNESCO (Laqua 2011), to engage with an interlocutor of his choice "on any problem that I might select" (Freud & Einstein 1932 et seq.). This was part of the Institute's remit to promote and publish dialogues between public intellectuals on matters of general consequence.

Einstein lit upon Freud as someone who could help him confront "the most insistent of all the problems civilisation has to face – Why War?" (Freud and Einstein 1932). Who better to involve than the men who had recast our material and emotional worlds, even if Freud often disavowed sociological or programmatic uses of his theories (Leith 2000; Medoff 2009)?

Einstein was confronting the alpha and omega of his intellectual and institutional existence. The application of instrumental reason, of means-ends rationality, was generating new and horrifying capacities to cause harm at cosmic levels through applied science in ways that subordinated peaceful concordance and nature to seemingly inevitable, teleological advances in technology. Einstein believed that progress towards a more rational world, a better one, was signalled by technological development, not least because it indicated a capacity for universal improvement in the quality of life. Technological change seemed to be a corollary of applying reason to understand and control natural forces, and perhaps one could govern human affairs via equivalent principles of rationality. He favoured "the setting up, by international consent, of a legislative and judicial body to settle every conflict arising between nations." Einstein recognised that:

> … we are far from possessing any supranational organisation competent to render verdicts of incontestable authority and enforce absolute submission to the execution of its verdicts. Thus I am led to my first axiom: the quest of international security involves the unconditional surrender by every nation, in a certain measure, of its liberty of action, its sovereignty that is to say, and it is clear beyond all doubt that no other road can lead to such security…

Of course, the League of Nations, the very sponsor of Einstein's and Freud's correspondence, was an actually-existing failure at world government. The League's few successes, like those of the United Nations today, came in fairly technical areas such as postage, health, agriculture, and scientific education, rather than the tumultuous sphere of peacekeeping.

In seeking to understand why a universal government of arms had not come to pass, Einstein sought a rational explanation of this seemingly irrational outcome:

> … strong psychological factors are at work, which paralyse these efforts. Some of these factors are not far to seek. The craving for power which characterises the governing class in every nation is hostile to any limitation of the national sovereignty.

This political power-hunger is wont to batten on the activities of another group, whose aspirations are on purely mercenary, economic lines…

He identified a "small but determined group, active in every nation, composed of individuals who, indifferent to social considerations and restraints, regard warfare, the manufacture and sale of arms, simply as an occasion to advance their personal interests and enlarge their personal authority" – in other words, a ruling class coalesced over twin drives and groupings—political power and economic advantage. Together, this formation controlled the organs of meaning that dominated the culture of a society: "the minority, the ruling class at present, has the schools and press, usually the Church as well, under its thumb. This enables it to organise and sway the emotions of the masses, and make its tool of them."

Beyond that sociological fact, though, what could explain something deeper – perhaps the darkest of all questions: "How is it these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives? Only one answer is possible," thought Einstein. "Man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction." Step up, Dr Freud; Dr Einstein is poised to hand you the baton. He has reached the limit of his relay-run capacities. And Einstein posed his foundational question to Freud like this:

> Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for civilisation as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown…

This all seemed irrational and unreasonable to him. It confronted the limits of rationality as a means of understanding: " … my thought affords no insight into the dark places of human will and feeling". What could be done to counter these horrendous drives? Einstein asked: "Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?" Essentially, he wanted to know the keys to civilisation, to pacific life, to rationality – to decency. Such were the great relativist's concerns.

The great psychoanalyst responded with a bravura blend of zoology, anthropology, pre-history, sociology and psychology:

> … conflicts of interest between men are settled by the use of violence. This is true of the whole animal kingdom, from which men have no business to exclude themselves. To begin with, in a small human horde, it was superior muscular strength which decided who owned things or whose will should prevail. Muscular strength was soon supplemented and replaced by the use of tools: the winner was the one who had the better weapons or who used them the more skillfully … intellectual superiority already began to replace brute muscular strength; but the final purpose of the fight remained the sam – one side or the other was to be compelled to abandon his claim or his objection by the damage inflicted on him and by the crippling of his strength.

That purpose was most completely achieved if the victor's violence eliminated his opponent permanently – that is to say, killed him …

Freud discerned a Darwinian motion, from primitive violence to technological violence to state rule. This was evolution beyond "the original state of things: domination by whoever had the greater might – domination by brute violence or by violence supported by intellect. As we know, this régime was altered in the course of evolution." That path had "led from violence to right or law" because "the superior strength of a single individual could be rivalled by the union of several weak ones". In other words:

Violence could be broken by union, and the power of those who were united now represented law in contrast to the violence of the single individual. Thus we see that right is the might of a community. It is still violence, ready to be directed against any individual who resists it; it works by the same methods and follows the same purposes.

One can interpret this transformation as a shift in power from brute masculine physical force to the equalising influence of technology, where simple differences of size and strength are minimised by bombs and other tools. Nevertheless, Freud confronted the fact that

… war might be a far from inappropriate means of establishing the eagerly desired reign of "everlasting" peace, since it is in a position to create the large units within which a powerful central government makes further wars impossible. Nevertheless it fails in this purpose, for the results of conquest are as a rule short-lived: the newly created units fall apart once again, usually owing to a lack of cohesion between the portions that have been united by violence …

This was the stunning truth of empire: its cruel overseas success derived from harnessing national energies that otherwise threatened its very origin, as domestic class struggle was overdetermined by the need for external unanimity. Once a peace was won, those tensions re-emerged to undermine that unity in a contest for the spoils that flowed from triumph. In other words, the conflictual basis to individual psyches and human development that Freud theorised would always reassert itself at a collective level.

Freud favoured the same initiative as Einstein to counter and corral these tendencies:

Wars will only be prevented with certainty if mankind unites in setting up a central authority to which the right of giving judgement upon all conflicts of interest shall be handed over. There are clearly two separate requirements involved in this: the creation of a supreme agency and its endowment with the necessary power.

But something else was lurking in Freud's sense of what articulated these fundamentally materialist explanations of conflicts and how to prevent or manage them. He felt more comfortable theorising eerie, unworthy drives than did Einstein:

… human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite – which we call "erotic", exactly in the sense in which Plato uses the word "Eros" in his *Symposium*, or "sexual", with a deliberate extension of the popular conception of "sexuality" – and those which seek to destroy and kill and which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct.

One instinct (Eros) favoured life; the other (Thanatos), death. By invoking them, Freud echoed what Hobbes had maintained 300 years before:

… 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.

Freud argued that it would be facile, if not impossible, to draw a hard and fast ethical distinction between these two drives, to admire Eros and abjure Thanatos, or (paradoxically) to destroy the latter, because

Neither of these instincts is any less essential than the other; the phenomena of life arise from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of both. Now it seems as though an instinct of the one sort can scarcely ever operate in isolation; it is always accompanied – or, as we say, alloyed – with a certain quota from the other side, which modifies its aim or … in some cases … enables it to achieve that aim.

What a marvellously Derridean formulation – the old boy rejecting binarism and arguing for the interdependence of supposed opposites!

That said, Freud was, as I mentioned, Darwinian – he saw culture evolving towards pacifism as more and more people rejected violence and war by dealing with the urges of Thanatos through reason. Anti-war movements represented such tendencies, as did free-trade opposition to war because it obstructed economic growth – an argument that was popularised during the inter-war period by the Nobel laureate and bestselling author, Norman Angell (Miller 1986).

But what if war is seen not as the opponent of rationality, unity, and government but rather their acme, given its organisation of technology, people and plans? What if war involves love combined with hate – Eros *as* Thanatos? Perhaps culture develops in ways that are in step with, or even generative of, killing machines – and loving one's nation necessarily involves devaluing others.

Then there is the question of language. Einstein's and Freud's use of male-oriented terms was presumably meant to signify people more generally. That was common at the time and beyond. But it gives us pause to ponder the specifically male domination of public life in general, decisions to go to war in particular, and the exercise of war, both then and in our own time.

So often, war is defined and exemplified in terms of male power and male loss, with the impact on women and children almost a matter of collateral concern, despite the active role a minority of women play in waging war, and the huge impact on all

women through grief and sexual violence. Similar intellectual and professional exclusions apply to journalistic personnel and coverage (Rayas 2009; Jones 2003; United Nations Security Council 2015).

One might also turn the debate towards Romantic aesthetics and associate Eros with the beautiful, the charming, the peaceful; and Thanatos with the awesome, the powerful, the violent: Eros is gendered as female and Thanatos as male. Perhaps the technological rationality and governmental rule favoured by Einstein and Freud are overdetermined by an ongoing dialectal oscillation between the two drives, abetted by an inner logic of machinery that animates the outer logic of war as couched in terms of national interests or human rights.

That socially, textually, and scientifically determined world would be what Dwight D Eisenhower (1972) so memorably condemned in his exit speech as US president: "the military-industrial complex," pervaded with love, affection, rationality, and fear – but above all, a clientelist logic.

Of course, Einstein's scientific ideas, and his opposition to fascism, together helped to enable the Manhattan Project.[4] A few years after the exchange with Freud, Einstein urged Roosevelt to forestall German efforts to develop nuclear weaponry by any means possible. Although personally excluded from developing the atomic bomb because of his progressive politics, that intellectual and programmatic complicity with Hiroshima, Nagasaki and mutually-assured destruction haunted the remainder of this vegetarian pacifist's life.[5]

The noted physicist J Robert Oppenheimer, who led the Manhattan Project, testified to the US Atomic Energy Commission about the instrumental rationality that animated the people who created this terrifying technology. Once these scientists saw that it was feasible, the device's impact on the Earth and its inhabitants lost intellectual and emotional significance for them. Such considerations were overtaken by a "technically sweet quality … when you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb" (United States Atomic Energy Commission 1954).

According to Ulrich Beck (1999, 2001, 2002), a science-laden, technologised society such as our own, which Einstein helped to create, must confront the "unintended consequences" of modernity, not only via technocrats seeking solutions to problems created by themselves or others, but also via transparent decision-making systems that encourage public debate, rather than operating in secret or deriding public perceptions as *ipso facto* erroneous (Beck 1999:3, 5). Hence the importance of considering what these architects of the contemporary world, from physics to therapy, thought they were doing.

For if early modernity was organised around producing and distributing goods in a struggle for the most effective and efficient forms of industrialisation, with devil take the hindmost and no thought for the environment, contemporary society enumerates and manages the resultant dangers (for example, establishing markets for pollution

that send murky industries offshore). Put another way, whereas modernisation initially concentrated on establishing national power and accumulating and allocating wealth, developed modernity produced new risks, beyond collective security and affluence. Contemporary populations face crises brought on by deliberate policy, for example nuclear energy, genocidal weaponry, biotechnology and industrial pollution – "professional miscalculations and scientific discoveries hurtling out of control" (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997: 320). This is often problematised as a typically male response to problems caused by technology – find a better technology as a way of fixing things. Such precautionary criticisms had to await the global threat of human-made climate change to come into being. They remain contentious, because of their opposition to the dominant discourse of growth, and have had little discernible impact on the waging of war.

Reportage

How could this account of masculinist scientific and technological rationality and unconscious drives help us to understand and improve contemporary reportage? We know that reactionary commentators, male and female alike, valorised the hypermasculinity that was unleashed beyond even its normal limits in the US after 2001, specifically highlighting working-class male chivalry, domination, and certainty. Major female commentators Camille Paglia, Peggy Noonan and Ann Coulter mandated a fully-formed, stable identity and fulsome heterosexuality (Cole 2008: 123-24; Miller 2013). It is clear that these public intellectuals, who continue to command column inches and video clips, took the opportunity presented by war to push a domestic agenda in favour of male power. Their use of international relations to attack queerness and feminism needs serious engagement via content and textual analysis that can identify trends in their work and check their facts. These women, and others of their cohort, get a great deal of media time in the United States, and are dedicated to attacking all forms of progressive politics.

They advocate the Thanatos-Eros couplet I have identified. Male valour is understood through bloodshed and leadership, and incarnated in the US military as the national embodiment of power, spirit, religiosity and victory. These writers represent the ideologues that Einstein identified as crucial to warfare, albeit with a focus on masculinity that he did not bring into question. Women's overt references to gender hegemony are much clearer than is the case when their male equivalents speak, where this dominance is assumed rather than highlighted.

As this volume makes clear, the experience of reporting war, as opposed to commenting on it, is very gendered. While women journalists sometimes get *entrée* denied to men in human-interest stories, personal confessions, and family perspectives, they are routinely excluded and patronised by everyone from translators to editors-in-chief, and held back from opportunities, told that the front is no place for a woman. We need all war correspondents, women and men alike, to be alert to gendered questions as a

core component of their work, as per the examples of Maggie O'Kane in Bosnia (Ó Tuathail 1996) or Jamie Tarabay (2013) and Sabrina Tavernise (2007) in Iraq (Tarabay on National Public Radio, Tavernise with the *New York Times*).

What might this mean in terms of both the background to conflict and the lived experience of it? I offer this list, based on what I learnt from the event that birthed this book and the literature I surveyed for this essay:

- a focus on violence to women as constitutive, not collateral

- questioning male collective violence

- interviewing arms manufacturers, government procurers, commanding officers, and troops on the basis of the gendered workforce and impact of their professions; and

- investigating the targeting of women for military recruitment and as rhetorical victims in need of salvation

Conclusion

The correspondence *Why War?* found Einstein stressing the conjuncture's pervasive lack of rationality, and Freud focusing on Thanatos as an essential counterpoint to Eros, a violent death drive of equal power to the reproductive, generative one. One man noted an absence of reason, the other *explained* it. The point is to change it, and to do so through the lens of gender.

Consider the appalling images of violence that have become part of media coverage of war, such as the impact of napalm on villagers, or military sadism on prisoners. The meaning of such pictures is not self-evident, for all the visceral emotions they may generate. That meaning is set and fixed, fleetingly, by the telling of stories, by the mounting of interpretations, by the testimony of journalists. The claim that such violence is aberrant neglects its simultaneously crucial and banal role in projects of gendered imperial war (Davis 2008).

How can you and I put this jumble together logically? The interplay of reason and emotion, of solidarity and hatred, of equality and hyper-masculinity, will go on and on. There are no signs of their baleful dances concluding any time soon. The binaries are too finely interwoven, their contradictory sinews too close together. We can hope to ameliorate the situation by pointing out how and where political economy, gender, rationality, technology, postcolonial geography, and instinct intersect. The notion of universal government is deeply problematic, as its treble struts, of reliance on the ultimately harmonious interests of states, the capacity of states to retain their power as uniquely legitimate users of force, and the rule of international law, have all been found wanting as a permanent peacekeeping institution (Kennedy 2006). The utopia prescribed by Einstein and Freud is beyond us.

But a strong, critical, and informed third sector may not be—one that is not only realistic about the prospects for world peace, but that understands the centrality of the gendered planning and execution of violence as a core aspect of what must be reported and resisted.

Feminism has a long history, like civil rights, human rights, Marxism and liberalism, of imagining a different future, of seeking a better life for all. That ability to think of a different time is a quest for making the imagined something real and tangible, and in a form that will make not only a pacific future, but a safe present (Davis 2008).

Notes

1. Thanks to the editors and copy editor for their helpful remarks on an earlier draft, to Horst Ruthrof for alerting me to the correspondence that is at the heart of this chapter, and to the people at the conference, who stimulated me to write it.
2. That formulation does allow us to transcend sovereign-state actors and include more complex collectives, albeit ones that seek hegemony over terrain as per states.
3. http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Teaching+resources/Key+Stage+3+resources/The+geography+of+conflict/The+causes+of+conflict.htm; http://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2014.pdf.
4. Women were more involved in the construction of the atomic bomb that he was (Howes and Herzenberg, 1999).
5. http://hypertextbook.com/eworld/einstein.shtml; http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/einstein/peace-and-war/the-manhattan-project

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