

BIOSOCIAL SOCIETY

Anthropological Perspectives on War

The eighth Annual Workshop of the Biosocial Society will be held on Friday 5 May 1995 at the University of Oxford Human Sciences Centre, 58 Banbury Road, Oxford. There are currently more than 23 major wars being fought in the world and many more populations are experiencing some form of armed conflict. There is an urgent need to acquire a better understanding of the causes and consequences of war for human populations and to assess the possibilities of helping them to alleviate their suffering. The five contributors to the Workshop will bring together a wide spectrum of experience and outlooks in order to address these issues.

Abstracts of papers

Animals and war. ROBERT BARTON AND ROBERT LAYTON. *Department of Anthropology, University of Durham.*

This paper evaluates the claims for evolutionary commonality by comparing social structure, spatial organisation and patterns of inter-group conflict in humans and non-human primates. Human hunter-gatherers live at low population densities in comparison with other species, range more widely, have permeable social group boundaries and are characterised by strict territoriality. Resources are sparse and unpredictable, and reciprocity-based sharing seems to be more adaptive than complete exclusion. This differs from the socio-spatial organisation of chimpanzee populations where extreme inter-group violence has been observed. Where chimpanzees live in similar habitats, they also have low population density and wide-ranging patterns, but the patterns of inter-group interaction are currently unknown. Conversely, humans exploiting more predictable resources, and living at higher population densities, show patterns of territoriality and inter-group conflict more consistent with those observed in other species, and here there may be broad functional similarities. These ecologically based intra-specific variations suggest that the expression of inter-group conflict is highly contingent and flexible. It is suggested that understanding of evolutionary commonalities demands consideration of ecological contexts, and a dissociation of war and territoriality. While human and chimpanzee 'raiding' may have similar causes, human 'warfare' finds no direct parallel in the inter-group conflicts of other species: it is iterated interaction, involving shifting supra-group alliances at a variety of levels (bands, tribes, nations) and occurs within socio-economic power struggles. The closest non-human parallel may be intra-group conflicts observed in other species. These are also iterated alliance based power struggles to which similar types of game theory models may be applied. The unique aspects of human conflict are also discussed.

War and the environment. PAUL RICHARDS. *Department of Anthropology, University College London, and Department of Irrigation and Soil and Water Conservation, Wageningen Agricultural University, The Netherlands.*

In early 1994 the world was experiencing 23 major and 82 minor armed conflicts (events with over or under 1000 deaths per year, respectively). More than three-quarters of these conflicts were in tropical and sub-tropical regions. Frequently, rebellions and other low-intensity conflicts depend on rural remoteness as a strategic resource. During the Cold War, the links between war and environment were largely seen in terms of issues such as 'nuclear winter' and the environmental impact of chemical or biological weapons. Since 1989 major new issues have emerged. Currently, the main concern is the spread of cheap conventional weapons in remote regions where clandestine economies are being elaborated by warring factions not easily separated into categories such as 'rebels' and 'bandits'. These regions are often of especial interest for the management of global environmental resources. The tropical zone is in general the world's major storehouse of untapped genetic resources and biodiversity, and conflict in several cases takes place within and may be provoked by the delimitation of conservation areas. Conservation is often conceived as a quasi-martial art, and poachers and gamekeepers may effortlessly transmute into rebels and militias. Primary consideration therefore needs to be given to the interrelations between war and biological resources, especially agrodiversity (crop genetic resources lost when agricultural production is disrupted). Attention is also drawn to other major environmental consequences deriving from the wholesale uprooting of civilian populations, and the distorted perceptions that prevail in the international media. For instance, there has been more interest in the impact of the conflict in Rwanda and Burundi on gorilla populations than in the loss of bean and other crops essential to the welfare of the local human populations. Finally, the paper outlines some guidelines for the management of environmental and crop genetic resources within war-peace transitions.

War and the mind. MELISSA PARKER. *Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths' College, and Academic Department of Public Health, St Mary's Hospital Medical School, University of London.*

The majority of contemporary wars are civil conflicts in which relatively few soldiers are killed. It is the civilian populations which tend to be the object of the fighting. Attempts to document the psychological responses to witnessing, experiencing and perpetrating violent and murderous acts have been minimal but suggest that suffering is intense and therapeutic responses inadequate. Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged by governments and NGOs that an understanding of individual and collective responses to the experience of war are needed when planning for peace and socioeconomic reconstruction. This paper analyses war trauma and its consequences for the individual within the family and the community. First, psychiatrically orientated studies, undertaken in Nicaragua, Cambodia and Mozambique are

reviewed in the light of recent work discussing the assumptions underlying psychiatric investigations and the hazards of relying upon biomedical diagnoses to understand distress in the non-Western world. Second, the paper discusses recent research by social anthropologists in Zimbabwe, Guatemala and Uganda which has highlighted the different ways in which distress and suffering are manifested in the aftermath of war. For example, spirit cults, witch cleansing movements and violence towards women often play a central role among populations attempting to establish a sense of order and cohesion during and after prolonged warfare and upheaval. The implications of these findings for identifying and supporting appropriate therapeutic responses for individuals at a local and national level are discussed. Finally, an attempt is made to assess whether research on war related trauma generates information about human nature which has not emerged from studies among populations at peace.

War, communality and the making of civil society. MURRAY LAST. *Department of Anthropology, University College London.*

This paper discusses the longer term effects of war as a communal (and not just a personal or psychological) phenomenon, a phenomenon with biological and social outcomes. First, the effects of war on the national or regional community are explored. There are both physical consequences (severe personal injuries, and the burden on the community of disability) and demographic effects (lessened fertility, epidemics and a lowered resistance to disease, and the sequelae of malnutrition). There are also social consequences of war, including joblessness after demobilisation, emigration, suicides, violence and banditry, economic dislocation through the loss of cultivatable land or, more positively, a heightened solidarity and a return to social and financial investment. The inter-relationships of these factors and the reasons why some communities are apparently healed more quickly and completely than others are discussed. The second part of the paper examines the effects of war at a family or household level and considers the experience of war victims in a local moral context. These victims fall broadly into three categories: (1) the wounded and disabled veterans; (2) civilian victims, including children suffering from malnutrition, women who have been raped and those randomly maimed by mines; (3) the 'co-victims' who have to care for members of their household who have been seriously traumatised by their experience of war. The secondary effects of war on these carers are easily over-looked, especially as indirect accounts rather than systematic data constitute most of the available evidence. Finally, general observations will be made about the spectator dimension which relates closely to local ideas about moral probity and mutuality. A vicarious experience of serious trauma can give rise to the distant spectator demanding revenge in a manner at odds with the victims' own response which may more often be to seek recognition of wrong and reconciliation rather than a savage retribution leading to further suffering. The interaction between the victim, co-victim and spectator, and their post-war role in healing, are discussed.

Anthropology and international intervention. TIM ALLEN. *Faculty of Technology, Open University, and Division of Legal, Political and Social Science, South Bank University.*

Anthropologists have often been associated with advocacy on behalf of populations amongst whom they have worked and a large number of professional anthropologists have ended up working for aid organisations where scholarly anthropological insights and fieldwork skills are in particular demand. In recent years, many of the increasing number of 'internal' or 'civil' wars are thought of as ethnic or religious wars, which sets them apart from wars between nation states. Drawing on anthropological studies, it will be argued that all war is linked to ethnicity, and particularly with ethnic boundaries. War is a means by which human societies define themselves as distinct from one another and maintain the moral codes and social values which make civil order possible. Ethnic and religious conflicts are not new phenomena but are closely associated with the erosion of nation states by processes of globalisation and localisation. It is essential to understand how warfare is connected with social interaction in order to assess how current levels of violence can be limited. Warring parties will not readily resolve their differences by co-operation in humanitarian relief efforts, or by open ended discussions. In a review of international humanitarian interventions in war zones since the mid 1980s it will be argued that the cumulative effect has often been to institutionalise violence. Anthropological studies in many countries have shown how local elites have used aid agencies to enrich themselves and reinforce their positions of power. Recent military interventions in Somalia and Bosnia have compounded the problem, providing international recognition for war lords. Finally, attempts by anthropologists to work amongst war torn populations and to act as advocates for their needs are discussed. While it may be possible to assist the maintenance of local social networks, the efforts to limit warfare have to be carried on at an international level. In this, anthropologists must find new ways of communicating their insights, particularly by improved links with the media.

Further information about the Workshop can be obtained from Dr Melissa Parker, Academic Department of Public Health, St Mary's Hospital Medical School, Norfolk Place, London W2 1PG. Tel: 0171-723-1252, Ext 5609. Fax: 0171-402-2150.