

Q 25

Functions of Primitive war. Hypotheses presented by various writers are concerned with the functions of primitive war in maintaining or regulating certain economic variables. According to these hypotheses, war breaks out between groups when the inequalities in their possession of, or access to, certain economic goods or resources reach a certain magnitude. Such hypotheses are "functional" ones if they go on to state that the effect of the warfare is to reduce the inequalities to an acceptable level. Examples are hypotheses that say that the distribution of camels among Bedouins and of horses among Plains Indians is regulated when groups with too many animals become the victims of stock-raiding by enemy warriors.¹⁻³ With respect to certain primitive people who are not pastoralists, similar hypotheses

have been presented, but with land, rather than camels or horses, as the redistributed resource. Meggitt^{4,5} offered such a hypothesis with reference to the Mae Enga, a horticultural people of the New Guinea highlands, while I have offered it as applying to the warfare of various primitive people who have in common the practice of swidden, or slash-and-burn, agriculture.⁶

1. Sweet, L.E. "Camel Pastoralism in North Arabia and the Minimal Camping Unit," In Man, Culture, and Animals, eds. A. Leeds and A.P. Vayda. Amer. Assoc. for the Advancement of Sci. Washington, 1965a.
2. ----- "Camel Raiding of North Arabian Bedouin", American Anthropologist, 67: 1132-1150, 1965b.
3. Vayda, A.P. et al. "The Place of Pigs in Melanesian Subsistence,". In Proceedings of the 1961 Ann. Spring Meeting of the Amer. Ethnol. Socy. ed. V.E. Garfield. Univ. Washington Press, Seattle, 1961, pp.69-77.

2.

4. Meggitt, M. "Growth and Decline of Agnatic Descent Groups Among the Mae Enga of the New Guinea Highlands," Ethnology, 1: 158-165, 1962.
5. ----- The Lineage System of the Mae Enga of New Guinea. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1965.
6. Vayda, A.P. "Expansion and Warfare among Swidden Agriculturists," American Anthropologist, 63: 346-358, 1961.



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Similar to these hypotheses relating to economic variables are certain hypotheses about the regulation of demographic variables. In these, the "resources" that are redistributed as a result of warfare are humans, especially in some cases, those belonging to some particular age or sex category. Autonomous local groups are small enough in much of the primitive world to be subject to considerable fluctuations in size, sex ratio, and age distribution as a result of chance variations in natality and mortality. The taking of war captives is one possible means of counteracting the imbalances resulting from such chance variations, and the capture of women in particular is mentioned in the traditional accounts¹ of primitive warfare in various parts of the world.

1. Davie, M.R. The Evolution of War. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1929.

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The redistribution of land as a result of primitive war can, of course, equally be seen as a redistribution of people upon the land - a victorious group's movement into a vanquished and dispossessed enemy's former territory. Should there be no place to which the vanquished can flee, the answer to problems of local population pressure may, it has been suggested, be heavy battle mortality rather than simply dispersal or redistribution. This familiar Malthusian hypothesis, attributing to war the function of reducing population pressure through effects on mortality, receives some support from accounts of primitive warfare in such regions as New Guinea. I know of one New Guinea local group of some 300 people that was literally decimated in a single campaign, and there are other reports of entire village communities, both in New Guinea and elsewhere, that were extermina-



ted in fighting.^{1, 2.}

1. Bureau for Native Affairs, Hollandia, Netherlands New Guinea. "Anthropological Research in Netherlands New Guinea Since 1950," Oceania 29: 132-163, 1958.
2. Krzywicki, L. Primitive Society and Its Vital Statistics. Macmillan, London, 1934.

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Another hypothesis in the study of primitive war is one of deterrence, or "preventive war": warfare undertaken by a group to avenge insult, theft, non-payment of bride-price, abduction, rape, poaching, trespass, wounding, killing, or some other offense committed against its members deters members of other groups from committing further offenses. Putting it in more explicitly functional terms, we can say that when some such variable as the number, frequency, or magnitude of the offenses committed against a group exceeds a certain value, then the group goes to war, and thereafter, at least temporarily, the number, frequency, or magnitude of offenses committed declines. The hypothesis focuses attention on what has been called "fighting for revenge" among primitive societies. The reports on numerous societies of swidden agriculturists in various parts of the world¹

and even on some of the simplest societies of hunters and gatherers², often emphasize the role of fighting in helping to satisfy aggrieved peoples' desire for revenge. However, the possibility of deterrence - the part that the fighting may play in maintaining the integrity of groups and their possessions - clearly needs also to be considered.

1. Vayda, A.P. Maori Warfare. Polynesian Society Maori Monogr. 2, Wellington, 1960.
2. Hobhouse, I.T. "The Simplest Peoples, Pt. 2" Brit. Jn. of Sociology, 7: 96-119, 1956.

made his "belly hot with anger" by taunting him. Whiting presents this as an illustration of aggression being generated within a group and the finding an outlet against another group. I obtained a number of similar accounts in 1963 in course of field work among the Maring-speakers of Bismarck Mountains in Australian New Guinea.

1. Turney-High, H.H. Primitive War. Univ. of S. Carolina Press, Columbia, 1949.
2. Wedgwood, C.H. "Some Aspects of Warfare in



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Hypotheses about functions of primitive war in regulating psychological variables have often been presented. The notion that primitive war may operate to keep such variables as anxiety, tension, and hostility from exceeding certain limits is implicit in the statements of anthropologists who speak of primitive wars as "flight from grief" devices¹, as "enabling a people to give expression to anger caused by a disturbance of the internal harmony"² and as serving to divert intrasocietal hostility onto substitute objects³. Some support for such generalizations is provided by native informants' descriptions of the antecedents of wars in which they or their ancestors have been involved. A good example is an account given to Whiting⁴ by one of his informants in the Sepik District of New Guinea. The man said he had organized a raid because his wife had

made his "belly hot with anger" by taunting him. Whiting presents this as an illustration of aggression being generated within a group and then finding an outlet against another group. I obtained a number of similar accounts in 1963 in the course of field work among the Maring-speakers of the Bismarck Mountains in Australian New Guinea.

1. Turney-High, H.H. Primitive War. Univ. of S. Carolina Press, Columbia, 1949.
2. Wedgwood, C.H. "Some Aspects of Warfare in Melanesia," Oceania 1: 5-33, 1930
3. Murphy, R.E. "Intergroup Hostility and Social Cohesion", Amer. Anthro. 59: 1018-1035, 1957, citing L.A. Coser, The Functions of Social Conflict. Free Press, Glencoe, 1956.
4. Whiting, J.W.M. "The Frustration Complex in Kwoma Society," Man, 44: 140-144, 1944.
5. Vayda, 1967.

the reduced pressure on the land means that the diminution of per capita food supply and the increase of intragroup competition over resources are arrested, and that domestic frustrations and other in-group



So far, I have, for the most part, presented each hypothesis as being concerned with the regulation of a single variable. It should, however, be noted that there also are hypotheses concerning the relation between functions in the regulation of one variable and functions in the regulation of another. Thus, a more elaborate hypothesis than those previously given would be the following: (1) a diminishing per capita food supply and increasing intragroup competition for resources generate intense domestic frustrations and other in-group tensions; (2) when these tensions reach a certain level, release is sought in warfare with an enemy group; (3) a result of the warfare is reduction of the pressure of people upon the land, either because of heavy battle mortality or because of the victorious group's taking its defeated and dispersed enemy's territory; (4)

the reduced pressure on the land means that the diminution of per capita food supply and the increase of intragroup competition over resources are arrested, and that domestic frustrations and other in-group tensions can be kept within tolerable limits. According to this hypothesis, psychological, demographic, and economic variables are all being regulated, with the regulation of one variable being dependent upon the regulation of another.

Reciprocally, some possible functions of civilized war are hardly to be expected in the warfare of primitive societies. Thus, any functions dependent on the subjugation and subsequent economic exploitation of enemy populations cannot obtain in the truly primitive world where neither food production nor political mechanisms are sufficiently developed for the support and control of economically exploitable classes of laborers or slaves.^{1 2} Similarly, the frequently encountered hypothesis that attributes to civil or intrasocietal war some functions in checking or stopping abuses of political power cannot apply to primitive societies in which no persons or groups are sufficiently strong to significantly abuse power. It is true that intrasocietal wars in Polynesian chiefdoms^{4 5} prior to European discovery³ and in African kingdoms^{4 6} may have functioned to check abuses of



power, but these societies, with their elaborate hierarchies of authority, are not truly primitive in terms of political criteria, even if the trait of writing, sometimes regarded as the diagnostic of civilized status, was not part of their cultures.

1. Hobhouse, L.T., G.C. Wheeler, and M. Ginsberg. The Material Culture and Social Institutions of the Simplest Peoples. Chapman & Hall, London 1915
2. Nieboer, H.J. Slavery as an Industrial System. Nijhoff, The Hague, 1900
3. Sahlins, M. "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief" Comp. Studies in Soc. and History, 5: 285-303, 1963.
4. Beattie, J.H.M. "Checks on the Abuse of Political Power in Some African States," Sociologus, 9: 97-115, 1959.
5. Gluckman, M. Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa. Free Press, New York, 1963.
6. Worsley, P.M. "The Analysis of Rebellion and Revolution in Modern British Social Anthropology," Science & Society, 25: 26-37, 1961.

