

Is There an Instinctual Basis For War? A Reply to Ludwig Janus

ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of war, according to Ludwig Janus (2023), arises from an interaction between male instincts and the psychology of trauma in various forms. This theory is inadequate and mistaken because it appropriates evidence from primatology in a one-sided manner and uncritically adopts notions from ethology and evolutionary psychology that are not consistent with the known diversity of forager societies, the limits of genetic explanations, and neuroscience findings on neocortical and behavioral plasticity.

The article "Reflections on the Psychological and Psychohistorical Causes of the War in Ukraine and of Wars in General," which appeared in the Winter 2023 issue of this journal, does not provide an adequate explanatory framework and perpetuates misconceptions about "human nature," violence, and the process of history.¹ Author Ludwig Janus concludes this article with a call for parenting reform that I wholeheartedly endorse. Here, however, I critically examine his causal claims.

INTRODUCTION

In his abstract, Janus succinctly states his theory as follows: "The causes of war lie in the interplay between male instincts of rivalry and defense with traumatically conditioned archaic feelings of existential threat and the resulting desire for destruction and power."² This picture is related to the disciplinary knowledge that the author considers relevant to the causes of war, namely "evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and psychohistory" (p. 165-166). Notwithstanding that the author dates war from the period in which states were formed (p. 166), he notably excludes political science from this list of relevant disciplines, a serious omission inasmuch as political science is at least as relevant to a psychohistorical etiology of war as evolutionary biology.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, whether one views the February 2022 Russian invasion as an entirely unprovoked aggression, a response to a security threat created by NATO expansion, or something else, the instrumental motivations of policymakers matter for any understanding of the conflict.

If we are trying to understand an unprovoked invasion, we can then inquire about irrational motivations on the part of Putin and relevant segments of Russian society that might have contributed to it. If the invasion was motivated by perceived threats to Russian security, on the other hand, that raises a different set of psychohistorical questions.

Similarly, structural factors matter for understanding war in general, and neither these nor instrumental factors can be reduced to unconscious motivations. To give just one illustration of what the interaction of structural and psychological factors could look like, Steven Pinker (2012) starts with the same instinctual causes as Janus, but argues that the process of state formation throughout history has created zones of pacification under larger and larger states, which Pinker sees as inexorably leading to global governance and the eventual abolition of war. In this picture, a supposedly innate tendency toward male violence took one form during the paleolithic, another form with the state system during recent millennia, and is likely to be superseded in the future by further structural development.

By contrast, Janus's omission of instrumental and structural factors gives rise to a fundamentally ahistorical picture, where "male instincts of rivalry and defense" have always been a cause of war in essentially the same way, from antiquity to the present. While he calls for amelioration of the traumatic factors that interact with male instincts, the latter have presumably always been with us and always will be. But if male instincts are an unchanging cause of war, how can we account for evidence that many prehistoric forager societies were relatively peaceful (Fry, 2015; Graeber and Wengrow, 2021)? This evidence calls into question the author's instinct theory of war.

PRIMATES, FORAGERS, AND NEUROSCIENCE

We turn now to a closer look at Janus's claims about "male instincts of rivalry and defense." On this topic, he mainly cites Frans de Waal's 2006 book, *Our Inner Ape: A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are*. This book is a comparative discussion of chimpanzee, bonobo, and human behavior that summarizes voluminous observations by the author and other ethologists. Unfortunately, Janus appropriates de Waal's ideas in a skewed way and also overlooks the limitations of the book.

The overall thesis of *Our Inner Ape* is that primate behavior is highly diverse and that humans are genetically similar to both our violent chimpanzee and our peaceful bonobo relatives. In focusing on the "male instincts of rivalry and defense," Janus appropriates de Waal's ideas about the similarities between chimpanzee and human behavior while neglecting his ideas about bonobo/human similarities.

As mentioned previously, the actual diversity of homo sapiens' behavior is apparent in forager societies, which varied considerably on the violent-peaceful continuum as far as researchers can tell from the available evidence (Fry, 2015; Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). This is consistent with de Waal's picture of human genetic and behavioral ambivalence. It is not consistent with Janus's instinct theory of war, which would require a more uniformly violent prehistory. Nor can Janus's theory explain the emergence of war itself (at least in the form of armed conflict between states), since nothing changed in the human genome that could account for this occurrence after 3500 BCE.³

This brings us to the limitations of de Waal's work. While this author is rightly celebrated for his rich and highly readable descriptions of primate behavior, he has little to say by way of explanations (notwithstanding the misleading subtitle of *Our Inner Ape*), and what little he does say has not been substantiated to my knowledge in the neuroscience literature. For example, de Waal refers to a "power drive" (p. 49), "dominance drive" (p. 50), and an innate human "will to power" (p. 54). As with Freud's "death instinct" theory of aggression, there is a large literature in psychology and psychoanalysis on these topics, which it is not possible to review in this short article.

For our purposes here, suffice it to say that biological drives (e.g., hunger, thirst, and sexual arousal) arise from hard-wired brain systems including the hypothalamus, and clearly function to keep individuals alive and perpetuate the species (Bear et al, 2020). In the neuroscience context, "aggression" does not appear to be a drive or instinct of this sort, but rather a product of the fight-or-flight response, which is also hard-wired (in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis) and apparently evolved to manage threats posed by predators (Ellis and Solms, 2018; Bear et al, 2020).

The neocortex, which organizes behavior and is found in all mammals, is a plastic and highly programmable system that apparently does not contain hard-wired cognitive-behavioral structures (Karmiloff-Smith, 1993; Ellis and Solms, 2018; Hawkins, 2021). (Some regions of the cerebral cortex are generally recruited for specific functions, but lesions in these regions can result in neural reorganization; Bear et al, 2020). This means that social and other complex behaviors structured by the neocortex, including intergroup violence, must be primarily learned rather than innate. Karmiloff-Smith (1995) showed how cognitive-behavioral structures are built up from experience in the course of individual development.

This cortical basis for learning, behavioral plasticity, symbolic representation, and communication is much greater in humans than in our nearest primate relatives. The neocortex of humans contains twice as many cells as that of chimpanzees (Mora-Bermúdez et al, 2016), for example. This raises

the question whether the two-fold difference in quantity has resulted in a difference in kind between chimpanzee and human intelligence and behavior. Suffice it to say here that de Waal's "gradualist" position on this question, which emphasizes continuity, is controversial.

While an adequate discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of the current essay, two critiques of gradualist primatology such as de Waal's should be mentioned here (Carron, 2018; Juan, 2011). First, while empathy towards the suffering of others is exhibited by chimpanzees, bonobos and humans alike, as de Waal asserts, Paul Carron (2018) discusses a fundamental difference between the psychology of human morality and that of our closest primate relatives.

Human morality does not consist in empathy alone, but in the regulation of affective responses in accord with internalized social norms. Carron shows how such human moral judgement entails a mode of abstraction that appears to far exceed the cognitive capacities of chimpanzees and bonobos. That is why de Waal, he notes, can recount the brutal killing a particular chimpanzee (Luit) without attaching any moral significance to the act, while a similar act if committed by humans would be considered murder.

Second, Salvador Juan's (2011) critique of evolutionary psychology, which he situates in the history of European thought, is relevant here. We can generalize the limitation of de Waal's primatology and philosophical anthropology by saying that humans are a part of nature, but by virtue of our vast neocortex and unique capacities for symbolization, we also transcend nature in ways that are impossible for chimpanzees and bonobos. Juan discusses the colonization of sociology and the humanities by ideologies derived from the natural sciences, as with Comte's positivism and Spencer's Social Darwinism. De Waal's and Janus's evolutionary psychology needs to be understood in this ideological context.

I have focused on Janus's claims about "instinctual" causes of war. His discussion of traumatic processes merits more attention than can be provided in this short essay. Suffice it to say that perinatal and other psychological trauma certainly contribute to human destructiveness, as Janus says. In fact, consistent with many current object relations and attachment theories, one might argue that pathological human aggression arises primarily from psychological trauma in its various forms. In that case, minimization of trauma through the reform of natal and child care, combined with a system of political economy that meets basic human needs, could mean the end of war and adoption of non-violent methods of conflict resolution and transformation.

In its current form, however, Janus's theory of war is highly problematic. The reasons, I suggest, are his skewed appropriation of de Waal's ambivalent

(violent/peaceful) primatology, and his uncritical adoption of notions from evolutionary psychology that are not consistent with the known diversity of forager societies, the limits of genetic explanations, and neuroscience findings on neocortical and behavioral plasticity.

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ENDNOTES

1. Consistent with the author's own usage of the term, by "war" I mean armed conflict between states or between armed factions contesting state power (i.e., "civil wars"). Although Janus himself does not talk about states and he claims that instinctual rivalry between human males is a fundamental cause of war, he dates the origins of war to the beginning of states around 3500 BCE (p. 166) and does not apply the term to lethal conflict between bands of paleolithic foragers. The semantic question of how to define "war" needs to be separated from substantive issues like the extent and form that lethal inter-group violence might have taken during the paleolithic.
2. Janus does not define "instinct," an ambiguous and problematic term (Blumberg, 2017). Since he posits an interaction between male instincts and psychological trauma, and since the latter arise from individual experience, I assume that by instinct he means a species-typical behavioral module or disposition that is inherited (transmitted genetically and/or epigenetically).
3. What might be an important development in the emergence of war is a structural factor that Janus omits, namely the onset of resource scarcity at the end of the paleolithic, when human population growth began to exceed the forageable food supply (Stiner, 2001; Weiss et al, 2004; Munroe, 2009). This created both the motivation for learning plant and animal agriculture and conditions for conflict between human groups that did not previously exist. Janus mentions these developments (p. 167), but they are peripheral to his causal theory of war.

c o m m e n t

LUDWIG JANUS

Comment on Brian D'Agostino's Response to my article "Reflections on the Psychological and Psychohistorical Causes of the War in Ukraine and of Wars in General"

The problem in the reception of my text by Brian D'Agostino is that I did not at all assert an "instinctual basis for wars" secured in the genome, but as D'Agostino correctly quotes an "interaction between male instincts and the psychology of trauma in various forms. "That is why I can't quite follow his critical objections in relation to such an assertion, especially

also to the limitations in the book by Frans de Waal, because I am not at all concerned with the general meaning of an instinctual reason for wars. My point is precisely the interplay between male rivalry instincts and early traumatizations.

On this topic, however, D'Agostino may well agree with me, as he puts it, "I have focused on Janus's claims about 'instinctive' causes of war. His discussion of traumatic processes deserves more attention than can be given in this short essay. Suffice it to say that perinatal and other psychological trauma certainly contribute to human destructiveness, as Janus says. Indeed, in line with many current object relations and attachment theories, one could argue that pathological human aggression arises primarily from psychological trauma in its various forms. In this case, minimizing trauma through birth and childcare reform, combined with a system of political economy that meets basic human needs, could mean the end of war and the introduction of nonviolent methods of conflict resolution and transformation."

The essential point here, however, is that I give a more systematic meaning to early trauma, which D'Agostino does not elaborate on. In particular, I think that the "immaturity" at birth caused by "physiological prematurity" has a systematic significance for the peculiarities of "Homosapiens." In particular, I think this represents a valuable addition to the description of the "fetal drama" as described by Lloyd deMause as a background for warlike events. Because of immaturity at birth, the unregulated fear and guilt and aggressive tendencies caused by traumatic aspects can result in such deep imprints and the corresponding repetitive tendencies as described by Lloyd deMause in "Restaging fetal traumas in war and social violence" (*Journal of Psychohistory*, Spring 1996). I explain this in point three of my article and in my books *Homo foetalis—The interplay of fetal experience with primate instincts and mind as the essence of man* (2018) and *Mundus foetalis—The reflection of the structure of the fetal lifeworld in the social and cultural lifeworld* (2021). Other aspects are explained in points four through eight of my article. However, I did not understand why Brian D'Agostino does not discuss these aspects of my article in more detail. The crucial point of view is that in the first year and a half, children are elementarily dependent on a reliable emotional coregulation by their parents, which did not happen often in many cultures throughout history. It was only in the second half of the last century that this basic need for relationship was discovered, and its full significance and justification based upon the "immaturity" at birth has not yet been fully received in attachment theories and political psychology.

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* The keytexts of the second two books are in translation into English available on my website www.ludwig-janus.de as downloads.