

Book Review: The Psychology of War

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The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique and its Madness,
by Lawrence LeShan. Chicago: The Noble Press, 1992. 163 pp. paper.

There was a time when wars actually showed a profit: they facilitated acquisition of new territory, resources or power, or they destroyed some great evil, all without spending more than one was likely to acquire. Since the advent of industrialism two centuries ago, this rationale — never a compelling one to anarchists, anyway — has lost all force. War *always* costs more than it is worth; winner and loser alike lose vast amounts of money, materials and human life, and gain little by comparison. Why, then, do we continue to fight? Because, Lawrence LeShan writes, when war looms we step into an alternate reality, a fairy-tale world in which the usual rules don't hold and our self-worth and very survival may require us to do and think very stupid things.

In his Introduction, LeShan (a psychologist with forty-five years' experience and eleven books to his credit) summarizes a wide range of theories on the origins and nature of war. Ecological and anarchist interpretations are notably missing. Not until one reads a bit further into the book, however, does one understand why. Though the author's insights and language are often remarkable, he does not see beyond a traditional Western paradigm in which certain assumptions are taken for granted: (1) power relationships and hierarchic authority are natural and inevitable; (2) the nature/nurture dichotomy is fundamental; and (3) so is the distinction between myth and reality. To his credit, he avoids other Western premises: that (4) some particular view of reality will be fundamental and therefore correct; and that (5) history is a record of progress. LeShan's acceptance of traditional Western categories is all the more astonishing because his basic proposition — that human beings are capable of stepping from one reality into another, and that each reality is "right" according to its own rules — is derived from the emerging post-Western consensus. Physicists and systems theorists, and now some psychologists and historians, recognize that no eternal verities underlie the universe. Reality is a product of the interrelationship of parts, and when the parts change, so does the reality. Scientists call this the "bootstrap hypothesis"; philosophers might call it situationism. Truth is what suits our purposes at the moment. Political and economic elites have always known that, with the proper orchestration of knowledge, they could alter reality for the masses, and get them to murder one another willingly on behalf of the interests of those elites. This is no great surprise; the process from the point of view of the manipulators is well documented in history. Now LeShan presents a skillful and persuasive explanation of what happens in the mind of the victim.

The tension between our need to be autonomous individuals and our craving for group identity is also well known, but LeShan's description of the phenomenon points toward Arthur Koestler's "self-assertive" and "integrative" model of the human mind, based on physiological evidence from the Papez-MacLean experiments. The presence of these two warring tendencies inside the same cranium, Koestler wrote, is the source

of all human misery and cruelty. When we go to war, we can bury the individualistic tendency and immerse ourselves in the group, an act which is almost orgasmic in the feeling of relief and fulfillment it brings. This, according to LeShan, is the real reason we continue to fight wars. Were he a bit more aware of anarchist analyses, he might have gone further. Wars are fought because we have not learned (authority does not want us to learn) that human peace and happiness are not dependent upon who *holds* power; they can only result from the *annihilation* of power. The real value of the book lies in its suggestion that war fever and patriotism, like other psychoses, may be curable. Much as we anarchists would like to believe it, warlike behavior is not entirely the product of ruling-class iniquity. We go to war for many reasons, most of them not of our own making; but one reason is that we *like* it. War creates a sensation of group solidarity, noble purpose, and self-justification. It allows us to forget our personal troubles and transfer our frustration and hatreds to an enemy who “deserves” them. If we can confront this fondness for mayhem, get at its etiology, we may be able to do something about it.

LeShan argues that we must step into a “mythic reality,” where we are totally right and good and the enemy is entirely wrong and evil, before we can go to war. He has a point, but it is oversimplified, and rather unfair to the mythic world-view. Considerable research indicates (and LeShan agrees) that the human mind is more comfortable in mythic reality than in a world where we must process and deal with sensory data. Everything is simpler, he says, in the mythic mode, making it easier to demonize the enemy and dehumanize the victims of war. True enough. But our natural propensity to think mythically suggests that the mythic mode is more natural to us as humans and as members of the ecosphere, and therefore probably more “correct.” The abominations we commit in wartime are not the fault of the mythic world-view, but rather, of our misguided attempts to express the mythic through the sensory. This perverse behavior is a product of Western civilization (and of a few others, equally violent), a culture that wrenches us out of our proper place in the world by constructing artificial hierarchies of power. Tribal people who live comfortably in mythic reality are seldom violent and never genocidal. Studying the Hopi and the Efe might be more productive than psychotherapy.

LeShan’s exegesis on the Persian Gulf war is the best feature of the book. We knew that most of the truth was being kept from us; LeShan explains why. Before the invention of photography and electro-communication, wars happened “far away,” and the gruesome reality could be sanitized before it was shown to the public. Vietnam, the first televised war, sickened the public and turned many against all war and violence. Bush, Schwarzkopf and company were not about to let that happen again. Atrocities committed by “them” were manufactured out of whole cloth, and atrocities committed by “us” were simply covered up. Expert control of communications created the first “clean” war since the early nineteenth century, one in which the enemy was a mere blip on a radar screen. We did not have to see his (or her) blood and guts. LeShan notes that the exploitation of public opinion for military purposes is easy for modern

governments, which are designed for warlike activities, not for the management of peaceful activities. Governments simply don't know how to deal with peace, and so are impelled toward war, sometimes even when no one in the government actually *wants* the war. The author hopes that a proper analysis of government functions can show the way toward a restructuring that will eliminate the inclination toward violence. It does not occur to him that government *is* violence.

The fifth chapter, "War and the Psychological Needs of the Individual," is the most Freudian and therefore least satisfying. Displacement of aggression, projection of self-doubts and self-hatreds, lack of meaning and purpose in life, and the need for a greater sense of belonging to a group are all defined and described with many examples, nearly all of them predictable and familiar. The work of post-Western thinkers, briefly alluded to in the introduction, is not here followed to its logical conclusion. Many cutting-edge philosophers and scientists, and many anarchists as well, would argue that the construction and definition of self is the deepest "psychological need of the individual." Our first priority is self-preservation, an imperative that necessarily includes the preservation of the structures and systems in which we participate —the rest of the human race, for example, and the biosphere. The great crime of Western civilization, the aberration that permits war, is the siren insinuation that the survival of "me" may require the destruction of "you." Though *The Psychology of War* is a fascinating and thought-provoking read, it is flawed because it misses this essential point.

The book contains many small errors of historical and literary fact: for example, it was not Pope Urban I who preached the First Crusade, but Urban II; Dorothy killed the witches of the East and the West, not of the North and the South. A minor point, perhaps, but indicative of sloppy research. For non-nitpickers who can overlook the mistakes, and for non-anarchists who will not be annoyed by the lack of concern with analysis of power and authority, this book provides many intriguing proposals and shrewd insights.

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