

Review of the book by
Norman Walter (1950) – *The Sexual Cycle of
Human Warfare: Being a New Theory of the
Cause of War and an Inquiry into the Possibil-
ity of War-Prediction*. London: The Mitre Press,
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This book review is long overdue. *The Sexual Cycle of Human Warfare* was printed in 1950 in London, which makes this review late by seventy years. To my knowledge, even the publisher doesn't exist anymore. However, many of its readers agree that this one is of the most underrated books on the topic of polemology ever. Among those readers was Anthony Burgess, the author of *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), who wrote that it is “shamefully neglected” (Burgess *et al.*, 1970, p. 322). Considering that this critique came from a novelist whose work on extreme and grotesque violence marked the second half of the 20th century and changed the way we have viewed gratuitous violence forever thanks to S. Kubrick's masterpiece film (1971) that was inspired by it, maybe it is time to look back and examine this volume.

The Sexual Cycle of Human Warfare was written by a former British colonel, Norman Walter. Nowadays, the book belongs to what we would call ‘the rare books’ and it is almost impossible to purchase a hardcopy. Luckily, few fans of social sciences and those interested in human behaviour have made it possible for potential readers to access it online¹.

The forward to this book was written by an anonymous author (N.I. McN.W) in October 1948, two years before the volume was actually published. This is a significant detail because it offers a historical framework to this volume: it means that it was written immediately after WWII, hence the author's need and desire to elaborate on the phenomenon of war drastically differently from the fashionable theories of that time. This after-war era was an intellectually stimulating period: Raphael Lemkin published

1. <https://www.guern.net/docs/sociology/1950-walter-the-sexual-cycle-of-human-warfare.pdf>

his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944) and established the concept of ‘genocide’ which permanently marked the way the mass-destruction of human population is viewed. A year later, Gaston Bouthoul, a French sociologist established a scientific discipline of Polemology (1945) addressed exclusively to conflict-studying. A year after Walter’s book, Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Just to mention few of masterworks of that era. There was a pressing commitment in those post-war years to make sense of what had just happened on a global level. In that spirit, the author of this book was marked too as a professional actor of the war that just ended and as a human being by the many, many casualties it resulted in.

The ‘Sexual Cycle’ is divided into ten chapters and the leading leitmotif through the pages is a comparison of human beings to cells in any biological organism. Although Walter was not trained as a scientist, he sought to analyse war as a sociobiological rather than a political phenomenon. He argued that in the human evolutionary past, inter-tribal conflicts made it possible for elders to discipline younger, competitive males in order to reduce their numbers. As a result, war became institutionalised by older males who wanted to maximise the number of available females by getting rid of a number of younger males, hence the pivotal mechanism of war is sex and sexuality. In that regard, Walter’s theory is a precursor of several theoretical frameworks which will mark the advancements of theories of war, such as the male-warrior hypothesis (see: [McDonald and Van Vugt, 2012](#)), the imbalanced sex ratio-theories (see: [Hesketh and Xing, 2006](#)), group-behaviour theories of conflict (see for more details in [Gardner, 2018, pp. 165–203](#); [Forsberg and Olsson, 2016](#), or [Tooby and Cosmides, 1988](#)) and others.

In the corpus of the text, the author follows various directions related to human nature and human practices and outlines major research leitmotifs that will be discussed forty, fifty and even seventy years later. The language he uses is descriptive and, except for the biological glossary, it is stripped of the usual social science vocabulary which had not been established until long after the publication of his opus. For an engaged and informed reader, the book appears to be a precursor in both time and terminology to various, modern disciplines which could recognise themselves on its pages. For instance, the author delves into the phenomena of exo- and endogamy², nowadays current anthropological concepts, which he takes as one of the causes/effects of primitive warfare (a topic to which Pierre Clastres will dedicate a volume in 1997 (*Archeology of Violence*). Or the concepts of emic/etic³ (p. 35), also basic anthropologic notions, for which terms will be coined later, in 1954, by the linguist Kenneth Pike. Without naming or rather possessing terminology for these concepts, the author draws attention to the partial or total incapacity of men to be objective when thinking about basic laws which generate the existence of mankind. In that sense, Walter Norman touched a multitude of basic (‘ur’) concepts which much later became a vernacular currency of the humanities and natural sciences in the decades to come.

One of the recurrent motifs of the volume is the back-and-forth process the author engages in: he outlines a parallel between what happens on the biological (cellular) level and finds examples in the animal (organic) world to prove his point, in order to call attention to analogous patterns in human behaviour. Worthy of the Lamarckian stance, that everything that happens on the microscopic level is also present on the macro level, he stresses that Man can’t be separated from his biological nature, a concept which is outrageous to modern mainstream western thinking, in which everything about human beings and mankind is a ‘social construct’.

The book is an exercise of thought, of logic and deduction, which underlines the ingenuity of its author. Another all-encompassing biological-centred worldview will be attempted twenty-six years later, and will achieve far more success and impact: Richard

2. Practices of taking wives from their own group (endogamy) or foreign groups (exogamy). Examples of endogamous societies are e.g. the Roma, the (Haredi) Jews etc.

3. These terms refer to two kinds of field research done and viewpoints obtained: the emic, from within the social group/individual (from the perspective of the subject) and etic, from external (from the perspective of the observer).

Dawkin's *The Selfish Gene* (1976)⁴. It follows a similar pattern of interrelatedness between hard-facts of science and logic (logic, as a systemic study of rules of inference), offering a worldview which is drastically different from the usual Man-centred, 'everything is a social construct' and 'everything can be mended with education' approach.

The method of the author, in order to justify his stance but also to convince his readers, is to introduce them to the specificity and basics of cellular-biology, which makes the reading of this book a bit demanding. He starts from Huxley's⁵ (1923) *Biology and Sociology*, which points out that Man descends from lower organisms and is composed of units who come together with a common goal. The sexual reproduction (which is the division of cells) is the main 'incentive' of splitting of organisms and creating new ones. Pairing and interchange of genic substance is the fundamental mechanism of that biological 'sexuality' and all other mechanisms of a higher level serve this very fundamental mechanism. Human beings (made of cells), similarly to cells, aggregate together through mental ties and other bonds, such as culture, language, and practices to move from a solitary to asocial state.

Norman Walter places sexuality ('sexuality' in all scientific implications of the concept) as the cause and the reason of conflict, from the individual level to the social. As in the species of primates (*hominidae*), conflict occurs when a change occurs in who gets to breed (the alpha male vs. the challenger(s)). This favours a particular selection of aggressive individuals and affects societies prone to war and war-like behaviour. To draw a parallel between individual and collective sexuality (meaning the survival and spreading of groups) is nowadays a very politically incorrect statement; however, the author systematically warns throughout the pages that this phenomenon is an unconscious event occurring on a biological level, which he calls the 'cellular level'. The biological result of war, but also its inducement, is the genetical recombination or 'hybridization', as the author calls it. The author is aware that this side of war is neglected in the scientific analysis of that era about the usual causes and results of human warfare (his 'whipping' of international institutions is particularly telling in that sense (p. 116)). However, this idea is peculiarly absent from the research field of humanities nowadays as well, except in a couple of notable examples which foster sociobiological theories (see more in [Smith et al. 2001](#)). War as an 'exchange of genes' with rape as its vector is still a neglected field of research⁶. But the author doesn't stop there; he is not keen in simplifying: for him, hybridization is not just a mere goal or a result of human warfare. Man for him is clearly a "war-making automaton" (p. 81), a product of multigenerational selection that favours war-conducting individuals. For the author, war is also a way for the society of 'get rid of' an undesired part of a population: young men of military age. And he points out how economics, weapon-production and politics are oriented in that sense, in which elderly men get to rule young men with the help of ideologies⁷, and when a critical number are reached, are sent to die for the 'Greater Cause'. To conquer via demographic shift is a clear direction towards which the author points out: war is therefore more than a mere phenomenon on the level of the cause-and-effect, it also has an evolutionary value. Demography is a weapon of war; the 'surplus' of young (otherwise unemployable?) men is a burden for the establishment and prevents it from functioning 'as usually'. Recent studies point in that direction ([Hesketh and Min, 2012](#); [Hudson and Boer, 2002](#)).

If these ideas sound preposterous to a 21st century reader, he or she should remember that there is research out there which proves that Norman Walter was on the right track. Let us mention some: the relationship between polygynous societies and male competition (e.g. [White and Burton, 1988](#)) at its link with conflict (e.g. [Koos and Neupert-Wentz, 2019](#)), sexual competition in general (e.g., [Geary, 2010](#); [Lucas and Koff, 2013](#); [Puts, 2010](#)), the aggressiveness of young males ([Ronay and Hippel, 2010](#)), the misbalance between sexes in 'mating value'⁸ and in multiple of other examples...

4. *With a slight difference : while Norman Walter's book remains almost unknown, the Royal Society science book prize listed (2017) The Selfish Gene as the most influential science book of all time.*

5. *Julian S. Huxley was the first director of UNESCO.*

6. *Absent as a cause of war, the concept of rape as a weapon of war and method of genocide is explored in legal theory over the past thirty years as its result. The examples, Bosnia and Rwanda, initiated this trend: in Bosnia for instance, all males above 12 years of age were killed; while women were raped in 'rape camps' and forced pregnancies were common; in the case of Rwanda, in a landmark case in 1998, the Rwandan tribunal ruled that "rape and sexual violence constitute genocide."*

7. *Theweleit's Male Phantasies (1977) comes to mind.*

8. *A simple and graphic explanation 'for dummies': <https://thepowermoves.com/sexual-market-value/>.*

There are various facets of human warfare which remain puzzling and undeniably present, and Walter does point his finger in those directions as well. Warfare does satisfy an emotional need and there is indeed a 'demographic moment' in each conflict. As Brunborg and Urdal (2005, p. 371) smartly put it: "demography as both a cause and a consequence of armed conflict." Undeniably, the most affected part of the population is usually the category of young males. The demography of human warfare can drive sex differences in altruism, as recent research demonstrates (Micheletti, Ruxton and Gardner, 2020). Likewise, on the molecular (genetic) "level", the ecology of warfare drives the evolution of sex-biased dispersal; sex-biased dispersal modulates intrafamily and intragenomic conflicts in relation to warfare and an ecological perspective of conflicts at the levels of the gene, individual, and social group yields novel predictions as to pathologies associated with mutations and epimutations at loci underpinning human violence" (Micheletti, Ruxton and Gardner, 2017, p. 1). It seems that Walter had a point after all. With the use of biological theories, he pointed in a direction that still hasn't been explored: the emotional, the enjoyable, pleasurable effect (or quest?) of human warfare where the stronger gains access to all resources. Accordingly, the chapter that is probably the most timeless is 'Ideological Deductions'. Its sentences resonate today as they did when they were written: "[e]conomic inequality is itself a means by which the younger and socially disruptive males are cowed and held in awe. Society slumbers uneasily, between its cyclic eruptions, upon the volcano of its own internal sexuality" (p. 188).

So the question remains that despite it containing such a quantity of innovative ideas and despite it pushing the exercise of logical reasoning into perfection, why did this book go almost unnoticed and why was it 'neglected' as Burgess wrote (see supra)? Was it the fact that it was published immediately after WWII when there were a multitude of publications of the highest quality being published and began providing answers to questions such as 'why war' and 'why such bloodshed' that were puzzling the Man of the 20th century? Or was it its sociobiological method that hindered the understanding of the text and limited the number of readers? Or maybe it was the publisher whose limits hampered its possible popularity and scientific outcome...? Or maybe it was the hostility of scientists who disliked a soldier, an amateur among their ranks. We cannot know. My guess is that the reasons behind the fact that this book went disregarded are a combination of all those circumstances. But I also have a hunch that one of the reasons is something more. It wouldn't be the first time that academia and media went after a research or a book which was against mainstream ideology. Roger Pearson's book *Race, Intelligence and Bias in Academe*, 1991 provides plenty of examples on how institutional science and media restrict (or in some cases even persecute) the 'kind' of research which isn't according to their 'taste'. Most of the scientists of the western hemisphere who do research on Humanity from the biological/genetical perspective have experienced some kind of backlash. They are left aside because their research is contrary to the mainstream ideologies which foster individuality over group-characteristics. They study Man as an evolutionary product rather than just a mere creation of societies. The opponents of such and similar ideas are those who are blissfully unaware that each society selects, and for whom the question isn't **if** this is true, but rather what **is desirable** for a given society.

This book might be outmoded reading compared to the new and exciting research which is published today, yet its smart quotes might still inspire researchers of war and conflict in a quest for old and eternal wisdom about human nature and the interconnectedness of our species with warfare.

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