From Aggression to War: Biological Dispositions and Social Dynamics

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Abstract

This article examines war as a recurrent phenomenon in the history of Homo sapiens and asks how biological dispositions, neurophysiological processes, and social institutions jointly contribute to organized violence. Its central argument is that human capacities for aggression and cooperation alike belong to our evolutionary inheritance, whereas war depends on historically variable forms of collective organization. Four interconnected dimensions of warfare are distinguished: economic, ecological-territorial, sociocultural, and psychological. From early human groups to organized states and modern conflicts, the article considers how technological development, political power, and cultural identities have shaped warfare. It also discusses civil wars and social and generational conflicts, while distinguishing those phenomena from warfare in the strict sense. War remains a recurrent political possibility, but its persistence should not be confused with biological inevitability.

Keywords: war, aggression, human nature, social conflict, violence

1. Introduction: War as a Constitutive Human Phenomenon

War can be provisionally understood as organized armed violence between political communities or other collectively constituted groups. It has marked much of the documented history of Homo sapiens and may have antecedents in forms of intergroup violence preceding sedentary agriculture, private property, the state, and writing. Yet the evidence for early prehistoric warfare is uneven, and the distinction between violent encounters and sustained organized war must be preserved.

War cannot be adequately understood as the simple sum of individual aggressive intentions. It also presupposes social coordination, material resources, cultural legitimations, and political choices. Biological dispositions may help explain why human beings can engage in violence, but they cannot, by themselves, explain why a particular war begins, why certain individuals participate, or why other societies avoid war under comparable pressures. This distinction is crucial for any account that connects human nature with the history of armed conflict.

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Four broad features of human life are especially relevant to this inquiry: (a) the dependence of human beings on resources acquired from their environments; (b) evolved capacities for aggression and defensive responses to threat; (c) emotional and affective processes involved in fear, anger, attachment, and group identification; and (d) the integrative capacities of the human brain, including cortical mechanisms implicated in planning, inhibition, learning, and the coordination of collective conduct. These features are not unique to human beings, nor do they constitute a biological program for war. Their historical significance emerges from their interaction with institutions, technology, and culturally transmitted practices[1].

In ordinary language, the term war is often used in a broad sense to refer to violent conflicts between groups of humans even without a particular organization. The term, however, is more appropriate with reference to cases in which a community or a group have organized themselves in a military manner, with ad hoc weapons and tools, to attack a community or a group with the aim of destroying them, subjugating them and taking possession of a territory and its wealth.

History contains both wars initiated by aggressors and wars fought defensively by communities under attack; it also includes episodes in which adversaries escalate mutual hostilities. Comparisons with competition among nonhuman animals may illuminate certain evolutionary continuities. Such analogies, however, have limits: rivalry for status or mating opportunities among animals is not equivalent to warfare between organized human collectivities.

War in the Homo species has transformed from a simple conflict into increasingly complex (organized) forms which, on the one hand, have developed in relation to the evolution of models of social organization; and, on the other hand, were based on the encephalic capabilities of Homo, in particular those of the neocortex. This allowed the construction of more advanced weapons and the formulation of war strategies, even before starting the war, and of tactics implemented during the conduct of wars (the art of war).

War, in its planning and implementation phases, is undoubtedly a very complex manifestation of aggression and violence compared to simple conflicts between humans, such as those between single individuals, between families or between different sectors or classes of a community: social conflicts. In it, therefore, there are many aspects that have been noted by various researchers. Four main factors can be identified as contributing to the outbreak of war: demographic and economic, political, technological, and psychological. The first referred to the increase of some populations and their need to supply resources,

[1] On the distinction between evolved propensities and historically organized warfare, see Wrangham 2019 and Fry 2013.

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which was implemented by attacking neighboring populations and appropriating their wealth. The second refers to war as a tool to consolidate political power and the identity of a population. The third, however, concerns the technical capabilities of attackers and those attacked. The psychological one concerns all the psychological implications relating to war, its preparation and its implementation: moods, passions and feelings have always been present during wars and are widespread, both among the aggressors and among those attacked. War involves emotional and affective processes, including fear, anger, and aggression, which depend on the interaction of multiple neural systems rather than on the activation of specific evolutionarily ancient brain structures. These processes contribute to human responses to conflict but do not, by themselves, explain the emergence of organized warfare.

This approach involves a necessary conceptual distinction. Aggression is a dispositional or behavioral category; interpersonal violence identifies harmful acts among persons; warfare adds enduring forms of collective coordination and political justification. The transition from one level to another is not a simple increase in intensity but a transformation in agency, organization, and responsibility.

2. Modalities of War

The origins and persistence of wars can be analyzed through four partly overlapping modalities. First, an economic modality arises when control of resources, trade, labor, or wealth becomes a reason for organized coercion. Resource scarcity may contribute to conflict, but war may also be pursued for enrichment or strategic advantage in the absence of immediate subsistence needs.

Second, an ecological-territorial modality concerns the occupation, control, and defense of places regarded as strategically or symbolically valuable. Territoriality has ethological analogues, but in human societies territory is also legally defined, culturally invested with meaning, and politically administered.

The third modality is the socio-cultural one which, very often (but not always), is correlated or derived from the other two: economic and ecological-territorial. This modality is very broad because it can affect many social and cultural aspects of a community. One of these is the desire for expansion whereby a community intends to expand ecologically and, in particular, spatially, conquering territories near (or far) from the place where it lives. This can happen without any economic motivation, i.e. there is no shortage of food supplies. Other aspects concern cultural and founding differences and the specificities of a community that intends to maintain and strengthen them, even if there is no attack on them by another community.

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Among the cultural aspects, the different forms of religiosity and religion have always had an important role, in particular since the period in which the sacred-religious was socially organized and even more so when religion played a dominant role, both socially and politically. This aspect was sometimes, but not always, related to the economic needs of social survival. In other cases, the religious aspect was expressed with reference to this need as an excuse, even if this need was not real; hence what are called religious wars even if political and economic causes were present in them.

The cultural modality is not limited only to religious political-social forms, but to a large number of values and traditions that are intended to be maintained and strengthened. In this case, wars were started under the impulse of the social fear of losing one's identity.

A further modality is the psychological one referring to the personalities of individuals (or a group) who hold social power and to maintain it prepare and carry out wars on (more or less) neighboring communities.

These modalities interact with features of human psychology and biology, including the capacity for aggression, responses to perceived threats, and mechanisms of social identification. It would nevertheless be unwarranted to infer any straightforward causal route from genetic inheritance or neural architecture to collective warfare. The central nervous system makes both violent and nonviolent conduct possible; historical institutions shape which capacities are encouraged, constrained, or mobilized.

Wars are also correlated with other aspects of human aggression, which has manifested itself in many different forms of intraspecific conflicts which did not have (and do not have) a specific armed or military organization, such as tribal conflicts which (however) fall within the modalities that have been indicated.

The four modalities should consequently be understood as analytical dimensions rather than mutually exclusive explanations. Economic interests may be articulated through religious commitments; territorial claims may become inseparable from collective memory; political leaders may cultivate perceived threats to secure internal power. The relative weight of these processes must be established empirically in each case.

3. Wars in Human History: From the Birth of Homo Sapiens to the Present Era

The first humans were hunter-gatherers who, like other living species, including higher mammals, and in particular anthropomorphic apes, often inhabited the same (or concomitant) habitats and were made up of groups that were not sedentary but nomads, who moved from one territory to another during the

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alternation of climatic seasons or with the view of finding new supply territories for gathering, hunting or fishing.

Hence, the onset of conflicts between groups in the same territory (or habitat) or in territories in which they moved and (thus) came into conflict with those who inhabited them. This still happens today in various regions of the planet and includes the great phenomenon of migrations that has characterized, and still characterizes, the Homo species.

Conflicts, based on heterotrophy, are present in different forms in all living species, but in a different form and extent than those between conspecifics in Homo and in the hominids that preceded it or who lived in the same era as Homo, like the Neanderthals. Before the historical eras preceding sedentary life, agriculture, the state and private property (including that of the means of production), perhaps as early as H. habilis, the pre-sapiens hominids possessed primordial weapons such as spears with flint (or obsidian) which were used to kill prey, but there is no equal certainty regarding their use for conflicts between conspecific groups or against groups of other hominids. It is believed that this occurred between modern H. sapiens and Neanderthals, but there is no data to confirm this hypothesis.

If early hominins and Homo sapiens lived in mobile groups that sometimes competed for access to resources, violent encounters between groups were certainly possible. Evidence from nonhuman primates can suggest comparative hypotheses but does not demonstrate that particular prehistoric populations practiced warfare. Archaeological findings require interpretation case by case, especially when distinguishing isolated violence, repeated raids, and large-scale organized war[2].

However, as there is no reliable data available, these considerations are only hypotheses, which will perhaps remain as such until evidence is found, even if this seems unlikely. With the continuation of the history of H. sapiens, however, more reliable hypotheses can be formulated, but we must refer to eras much later than that of the beginnings of ancient and modern H. sapiens. It is believed that to be certain of armed conflicts between Homo conspecifics we must refer to the eras in which we have written documents that no longer refer to conflicts but to real wars and (therefore) relating to the period in which sedentary living, agriculture and even a form of state were present. In this period, conflicts and wars did not only occur between settled groups of humans but also between them and others who were also nomadic.

We must therefore distinguish hypotheses about interpersonal and intergroup violence in prehistory from historically documented wars. Written records provide explicit accounts of certain conflicts, but they are not the only relevant evidence: skeletal trauma, weapons, settlement patterns, fortifications, and

[2] For differing approaches to the archaeology and anthropology of early war, see Ferguson 2013 and Fry 2013.

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funerary contexts may also be informative. The prehistoric cemetery of Jebel Sahaba, for example, has been interpreted as evidence of recurrent interpersonal violence rather than an unequivocal record of one discrete battle (Crevecoeur *et al.* 2021).

The available evidence supports the view that armed conflict has a long and geographically extensive history, although its frequency, organization, and intensity have varied considerably. It does not establish that all human groups at all times engaged in war. The development of sedentary settlements, agriculture, political hierarchies, and states created new possibilities for the organization and escalation of violence.

War is among the most destructive collective expressions of human violence. Emotion, threat perception, strategic reasoning, and institutional authority can all contribute to it. Brain processes implicated in affective responsiveness are not simply opposed to a rational neocortex: emotional evaluation, executive control, social learning, and deliberation interact dynamically. The ability to plan campaigns, manufacture weapons, coordinate fighters, and justify violence may intensify destructive action, but the same cognitive capacities may support restraint, negotiation, and peace-making.

4. War, State Formation and Political Power

For the origin of wars, we can refer to populations such as those of the Sumerians, the Hittites, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians. This reference is legitimate because in these populations the use of written languages and representations on stone were present, for which there is sufficient data to affirm that these populations widely practiced war with different methods. These were armed conflicts relating to energy supply, the possession of ever larger territories and also to political pressures, together with the "psychological" ones typical of the reigns of these populations: among the many and best known, we can remember Ashurbanipal (Assyrian king), Hammurabi (Babylonian king), Ramesses II (Egyptian pharaoh) and Alexander the Great (Macedonian king), who founded his empire even though there was no need for supplies for the population of Macedonia to which he belonged and held political power. In medieval times, we must remember the various Chinese emperors and the two most famous Asian rulers, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane, who built great empires with the extermination of millions of humans and, like those mentioned, their wars had no motivation strictly linked to survival of their peoples but were generated by their political-military impulses.

The analysis of the wars of antiquity, but not only those, allow us to note that many, although not all, wars were not organized to save populations that needed supplies, but were driven by political pressures

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which, in turn, were based on the aspirations of power of those who already held it in their own territories but who intended to support and expand it through the instrument of war, and with the violent conquest of territories and populations, even very distant geographically (as is the case with Alexander the Great).

From those ancient eras, not only those mentioned, but also those present in Asia and eastern countries (for example, in India during the Veda civilization, 1500–500 BC, with the related epic poems, Ramayana and Mahabharata or in China during the Shang and Zhou dynasties of the Bronze Age), wars began to be a central part of political power. With the birth of the state, this war process also took on the aspect of defense, not only of a territory, but of a community culture. The birth of nations (kingdoms or empires), with their cultural, social and religious aspects correlated with economic ones, had a very significant impact on the evolution and spread of wars. The birth of the state also brought with it the concept of nation for which wars, until today (except for invading peoples), have taken place in the name of a nation (or ethnic group) which was founded not only on a socio-cultural tradition but also on its identity. This was characterized by many aspects that were accepted by those who were part of it and who were ready to defend both by their own will and at the urging of the dominant classes, who managed not only the socio-economic condition but also that of the military organization. These political communities were often characterized by shared cultural traditions, languages, and forms of collective identification, although their populations were not necessarily homogeneous in terms of ancestry. The armies of Alexander the Great, as well as those of the Assyrian and Babylonian kingdoms, illustrate how political and military organization could bring together groups of diverse geographical and cultural origins.

The political organization of these communities played a crucial role in shaping collective identities and mobilizing populations for warfare. State institutions matter not only because they can organize armies and finance campaigns, but also because they can establish laws, diplomatic procedures, and mechanisms for controlling armed force. A theory of war that highlights the state's coercive capacities must therefore also account for its potentially restraining functions.

5. Religion, Culture and Identity in Warfare

In human history, not only in the West but also in the East and in the Americas, religions that were closely linked to political power often played a founding role. There were, and still are today, wars that are based on a religious belief that unites and urges believers to fight against peoples of other religions, who were considered enemies capable of destroying their religion and related society. These were religious wars which were considered holy wars, as in those perpetuated in the name of Christianity such as the Crusades,

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the medieval ones of the Muslims to conquer Christian countries, those of the Ottoman empire or (even currently) the Muslim ones which are based on jihad and which also manifest themselves with terrorist attacks carried out in Western and (particularly) European countries, but not only.

The religious component of wars is not only referable to religious wars, or holy wars, but to almost all wars, in fact since ancient populations such as those of the Sumerians or Hittites. In their pantheon there were one or more deities of war. These deities were often also the most venerated and they were turned to win a war. We can remember, with reference to the more ancient ones, Shara, for the Sumerians, Belus for Babylon, Ishtar for the Assyrians. Of the Assyrian culture, a large number of stone finds were discovered in which not only the god of war but many fighting scenes were depicted. These finds (and also those of other cultures including the Greek, Egyptian, Roman or Asian ones) reveal that, since ancient times, war was not only fought, but had a great social value, so it can be said that there was a culture of war that was widespread and accepted by the entire population and which also manifested itself with cults and celebrations aimed at the divinity of war.

Religious traditions, moreover, can legitimate hostilities or encourage their limitation. Their influence is neither constant nor independent of political institutions. The relevant question is how particular interpretations, authorities, and social circumstances translate beliefs into collective action.

6. War, Genocide and Large-Scale Destruction

Wars have sometimes been accompanied by genocide, ethnic cleansing, or campaigns of mass killing directed against civilian populations. Yet these categories must not be treated as interchangeable. Genocide has a specific meaning in international law: acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such. The history of organized violence includes many instances of deliberate attacks on civilians; each case, however, requires careful historical and legal assessment before the term genocide is applied[3].

Ethnic and racial ideologies have motivated or intensified some modern conflicts, including the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The mechanisms at work cannot be explained by analogies with reproductive competition in other animal species alone. Propaganda, institutional power, categorical exclusion, and organized participation are indispensable to understanding such violence.

[3] United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), Article II. The term is used here in its specific legal sense.

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Reliable aggregate estimates of deaths from warfare across all historical periods are not available. The evidentiary basis differs sharply between ancient, medieval, and contemporary conflicts, and reported totals vary with the inclusion or exclusion of famine, disease, displacement, and other indirect effects. The Second World War alone caused many tens of millions of deaths, but a single unqualified total obscures methodological differences between estimates.

The First World War likewise produced losses on an immense scale, with estimates differing according to whether they include military and civilian deaths, indirect mortality, and the consequences of related political upheavals. For comparative purposes, historical figures should be accompanied by definitions of what is counted and by explicit source references.

Taken together, the two world wars illustrate the catastrophic scale reached by industrialized warfare. More generally, armed conflicts have destroyed communities, infrastructures, cultural heritage, and the conditions necessary for social reproduction. In the twentieth century, mechanized and aerial warfare dramatically expanded the capacity to devastate entire urban areas; the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the possible consequences of nuclear escalation especially stark.

7. Contemporary Wars and Global Rearmament

If we look at current nations, even the largest ones, we observe that they were formed through continuous wars that have taken place over numerous centuries. We can only partially exclude the USA which was formed without wars between nations; however, there was the war against England for their independence, the civil war and the wars against the indigenous populations which led to genocide. In the Americas, this process of state formation through wars between nations was different. However, also in this case there were numerous wars between the different Amerindian populations in the medieval ages, such as those who inhabited, for example, Mexico and Peru where the Aztecs, Maya and Incas clashed against other Amerindian populations. If you examine the current nations of East Asia, for example, China, India, Cambodia, Korea, Japan, and others, even in these geographical areas the current nations are the result of centuries of wars between nations. For example, consider the numerous wars within China or against Genghis Khan's army, or even the wars that led to the formation of India and other nations in that area such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. India has been partially invaded many times in history and the greatest conquest by war was that relating to the invasion in the second millennium BC of Aryan populations coming from Central Asia who spoke different languages. In the following centuries, these Aryan populations managed to expand from the north to the south and constituted the Civilization of the Vedas

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(Hinduism) which shaped the history of India until today. Similar analyzes can be formulated in relation to many other current nations and this applies (in particular) to those of Europe which, from the fall of the Roman Empire (476 AD) until the end of the Second World War (1945) and the fall of Nazism and Fascism, have been fought for more than 1500 years with continuous and lasting wars (between Christian populations). From time to time, these have profoundly modified the political-social structure of the whole of Europe with the succession of the borders of the European nations (including the most recent in the Balkans after the fall of Tito's communist regime). The formation of the EU brought this long period of wars to an end, but even today there are historical echoes of these rivalries.

So, it can be stated that war has always been at the center of human history, which is indeed steeped in wars; unfortunately, even today, wars in the world are not only present but are numerous, including the most intense ones, such as in Ukraine, the Middle East or Syria, and those in many African countries.

War continues to be a political option in many parts of the world. Conflict-monitoring projects, including the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), document patterns of organized violence, although their definitions and methods differ. Contemporary rearmament and military spending must therefore be examined using time-specific evidence, rather than assumed to follow a single uninterrupted trajectory[4].

From the end of the Second World War to today there have been countless local or regional wars involving numerous nations. Just think of the wars in Korea and Vietnam or those in the Balkans and all the others that have occurred in Africa.In the current era, there are many armed conflicts and wars underway in various countries. Among these the following can be mentioned.

First of all, let us mention the current one triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine which led to numerous economic and social consequences throughout the world, but there are many others that have not received prominence, or at least little.

Among the conflicts of particular international significance in the middle of the 2020s are Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, and the wars and hostilities involving Israel and Palestinian armed groups. The crises in Yemen, Sudan, Myanmar, and other regions illustrate the diversity of political circumstances in which protracted armed conflict occurs. Their causes and responsibility cannot be reduced to a single common cultural or biological factor. Other major sites of organized violence in recent years have included parts of Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and

[4] For time-sensitive conflict data, consult ACLED (acleddata.com) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (ucdp.uu.se), taking account of their different coding rules and reporting dates.

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the Central African Republic. The status and intensity of particular conflicts change over time; a current list should always be checked against contemporary conflict datasets rather than treated as permanent.

Since the end of the Second World War, there have been many wars between nations and civil wars and humanity has not yet freed itself from war, which presents itself as one of the most widespread methods for resolving conflicts or competition between humans.

Nuclear arsenals remain a distinctive and potentially catastrophic dimension of contemporary warfare. The exact number of warheads and their operational status depend on estimation methods, national secrecy, and the reference year. Accordingly, numerical claims should be drawn from a dated source such as the annual SIPRI Yearbook, distinguishing total inventories from deployed or operationally available warheads[5].

War and armed conflict continue to structure relations between states and communities, even as international institutions, diplomacy, economic interdependence, and regional organizations provide means of cooperation. The European Union has helped consolidate peace among its member states, but this achievement should not obscure violent conflicts elsewhere in Europe or the role played by other historical and geopolitical conditions.

Rearmament can intensify insecurity, but its political meaning depends on context: military preparations may be presented as instruments of deterrence, defense, coercion, or conquest. No general account of warfare is complete without distinguishing these purposes and evaluating their consequences. Nor is it adequate to conclude that international organizations are wholly incapable of conflict prevention merely because they have failed in prominent cases.

The enduring possibility of war does not imply that every political community must eventually wage it. Deterrence, institutional limits, public accountability, and international coordination are historically contingent responses to persistent risks. They warrant analysis precisely because the dispositions that make organized violence possible do not predetermine the choices of states or populations.

8. Civil Wars and Social and Generational Conflicts

In the previous section we referred to wars between peoples and nations, but armed conflicts have been present (in many forms) even within the same peoples or nation. In all historical eras, armed conflicts or actual wars have occurred between different groups or factions for different reasons. In most cases it was a

[5] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), SIPRI Yearbook (annual editions), chapter on world nuclear forces.

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matter of power conflicts, as still happens today in some African nations and in other areas such as the Philippines. In the past, these conflicts were almost intrinsic to the power dynamics by which individuals, groups or classes worked to acquire the power of the state and this goal could only be achieved by forming an army that conflicted with the one that governed the state. The outcome of these civil wars was a new state power that replaced the previous one, but this did not always lead to a social and economic improvement for the entire population. Numerous historical examples can be remembered that occurred on different continents and among these there were the well-known ones that occurred in the history of the Roman Empire such as that between Julius Caesar and Pompey; or we can still remember the Civil War between the North and South of the USA. This way of alternating political power was implemented up until the modern era and even today, but with the advent of democratic states this alternation began to take place in an electoral form which, although sometimes with strong disagreements, almost never led to clashes of an armed type although it was often characterized by acts of violence between the various parties involved.

Social clashes were often caused between different political factions representing different social classes, as happened with the social revolutions starting from the French Revolution up to the revolutions of the twentieth century in Russia, China and other countries, which established different forms of autocracies (or dictatorships) like the current one in North Korea. Similar armed clashes between different political parties occurred in various nations of Central and South America or in many African countries, where armed clashes have also occurred between different ethnic groups.

In addition to these armed clashes, current and past societies have often been involved in violent clashes between different factions which could also interest and involve some social classes. If we observe the current era, even in democratic countries, we find that there are continuous social clashes of a violent nature which often also have an armed aspect, as happened in Italy in the 1970s with the phenomenon of social and political terrorism. This is a phenomenon that is still present in many countries, for which terrorism is one of the relevant aspects of social violence.

Such social clashes are related to many characteristics of a community: for example, they can be based on social, economic and trade union claims, on disputes for the possession of some territories or even for racial or religious reasons. This has happened in various countries, including the clashes between Hindus and Muslims in India or between Muslims and Christians in some African or South Asian countries.

Among this wide diversity of social clashes are also those social conflicts that are (so to speak) endemic between different generations.

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Conflicts between generations have always occurred and are still frequent in many countries today and, in some cases, they are also very violent. They are directed toward the state and various state institutions and are also capable of subverting the current order, but they represent, even if in a confusing way, the segment of society seeking to modify some aspects of the social structure; what is new that can make a given community progress. Consider, for example, the feminist movement which (in many countries) has managed to change the conditions for women, even if only partially, but only in Western countries. Meanwhile, in Islamic ones the conditions for women have remained so and sometimes they have even worsened, as happened in Afghanistan with the return to power of the Taliban, or in Iran with the regime of the Ayatollahs.

Even in the Western world, youth movements have often managed to modify some social aspects such as, for example, the movements of 1968 which led to radical changes, particularly in the world of schools and universities.

Conflict between generations, social movements, and struggles over political representation are recurrent features of collective life. They may occasionally take violent forms, but they can also be negotiated through institutions and can contribute to reform. This qualification reinforces the distinction running through the article: the persistence of social conflict is not the same as the inevitability of armed war. The possibility of restraint is itself part of the human capacities whose biological and cultural development the analysis has considered.

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