El grupo paranoide

Chapter 8

War and warriors

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War

In the first part of this book, the idea has been put forward that paranoid activation may simply constitute a transitory and "normal" state of the individual that reverts with the simple passage of time or a change in circumstances.

Jumping to the collective level, there is an excellent example of a also transitory paranoidization: war. Indeed, beyond technical definitions, which tend to limit it to armed confrontations and their preparations, war is a *psychosocial state* with its own recognizable profiles. One can be in that state, that of a war footing, without firing a single shot. And, conversely, a State may participate in an armed confrontation without the country truly being *on a war footing*.

> Thus, the theories bequeathed to us by modern wars could be broadly summarized as follows. War is a means — a risky one, to be sure — by which men seek to defend their collective interests and improve their way of life; or, alternatively, war derives from subrational impulses not unlike those that lead individuals to commit violent crimes. In our times, most people seem to subscribe to both viewpoints simultaneously, recognizing on the one hand that war is a beneficial enterprise, aimed at satisfying the material needs of the contending groups, and, on the other, that war responds to deep and 'irrational' psychological needs. The first part of this assertion is beyond question — that is, wars are directed, at least in appearance, toward securing access to indispensable goods such as territory, oil, or 'geopolitical advantages.' The mystery lies in the peculiar psychological power that war exerts over human beings (1).

This psychological power was sought to be linked, drawing on instinct theory, to the need to satisfy an innate and universal aggressive drive.

> In the 1960s and 1970s, the debate on the psychology of war focused on the concept of an 'aggressive instinct' characteristic of human beings, or perhaps only of the males of the human species (1).

However, the relationship between war and aggressiveness is not so simple. There are wars in which aggressiveness is unnecessary and even harmful.

> Hand-to-hand combat can arouse emotions such as anger and aggressiveness, and may even require them, if only to trigger the necessary muscular activity in the organism. However,

> in the case of weapons used at long range, such as rifles, bows and arrows, emotions of all kinds can rather be a serious disadvantage. Coolness and the ability to keep aiming and firing constantly under enemy fire is what matters most. For this reason, as the distinguished American military history specialist Robert L. O'Connell affirms, the appearance of firearms in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought about a change in the ideal personality of the warrior, who no longer needed to possess 'fierce aggressiveness,' but rather 'passive disdain' (1).

Consequently,

> In other words, war is a complex and collective activity that cannot be explained on the basis of a warrior instinct residing in the individual psyche (1).

War, it would seem, is not due to the pressure of an "aggressive instinct" that, following the hydraulic model of the early ethologists, needs to be periodically discharged. But war, nonetheless, is indeed related to a peculiar psychological state clearly differentiated from the normal one.

> It is nothing short of surprising that, even in the heat of battle, few men resign themselves to firing directly at individual enemies. As any drill sergeant could attest, there is a notable difference between an ordinary man or boy and an effective killer. A transformation must take place: the man or boy sheds his habitual personality to become an entirely different being, and may even adopt a new name. On a small scale, in traditional societies, the change was usually effected through a ritual in which drums were beaten, dancing was performed, fasting was observed, and sexual abstinence was practiced… All of this contributes to lifting the man above his everyday existence and placing him in a new warrior mode of being, which manifested itself in body paint, masks, and special headdresses (1).

In general, the mutation of the ordinary man into a homicidal warrior is a collective phenomenon, one that occurs in several individuals at once, after being subjected to a set of stimuli and to training, also simultaneously. Under certain circumstances, the aforementioned transformation occurs not only in the fighters called to combat, but in society as a whole.

> Nationalism

> Not only warriors have the privilege of experiencing the profound psychological transformation that separates peace from war. Entire societies can allow themselves to be swept into a kind of 'altered state' characterized by emotional intensity and by the obsession with representative totems of the collective, whether sacred images or yellow cockades and flags, as in our times. Thus, for example, the outbreak of the First World War unleashed a genuine frenzy of enthusiasm among non-combatants and potential recruits alike, and it was not enthusiasm for killing, for plunder, or for 'imperialist expansion,' but for much loftier ideals. Although the British people had opposed participation in the war as a bloc until it was declared, at that moment the inflamed crowds took to the streets and surrounded Buckingham Palace for days and days. In Berlin, the masses poured into the streets 'as if a human river had burst its banks and flooded the world'. In St. Petersburg, the mob burned the furniture of the German embassy while women tore off their dresses and offered them to soldiers in the middle of a public square. When the United States joined the conflict on April 6, 1917, the spectators at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York rose to their feet and greeted the news with a 'thunderous and prolonged ovation' (1).

Certainly, some societies seem never to have known this "altered state," notably our Paleolithic hunter-gatherer ancestors. But, once set in motion, it manifests itself in a set of universal traits. The "emotional intensity" and "obsession with representative totems" of the males of any small tribe ready to take revenge on a neighboring village for having used witchcraft against them differ little from the "emotional intensity" and "obsession with representative totems" of exalted patriots ready to reclaim a small valley they believe belongs to them, and to die for it if necessary, or ready to punish another nation for a recently suffered affront.

It must be added that "emotional intensity" and "obsession with representative totems" are, as we shall have occasion to see, characteristic traits of paranoid contagion groups as a whole and not solely of societies on a *war footing*, although in the former case these would be relatively stable traits over time, whereas in the latter they typically appear and disappear with a certain abruptness. But the similarities between societies in the "altered state" of a war footing and the groups we have identified as PCGs do not end there. In war, for example, human collectives become *highly cohesive* and prone to paranoid beliefs sprouting, spreading, and taking root within them with unusual ease *paranoid beliefs*…

The warriors

In what are known as tribal societies, war involves all the members of the family clan or village, or of the tribe itself — or, to be more precise, all the adult males in good physical condition, who mobilize as a unit to fight the enemy, temporarily abandoning their usual agricultural occupations or hunting. With the increasing complexity of social systems and the emergence of the first "chiefdom societies," war would become the responsibility of a noble elite specialized in it.

The potential for the general mobilization of a population, characteristic of primitive tribes, would not reappear until the emergence of the modern Nation, in which men devoted at least one year of their lives to military training, subsequently remaining in a state of permanent availability to their homeland. A homeland that, in times of war, also mobilizes the rest of society (women, children, the elderly, the sick, adult men not called to combat...), on the home front, in pursuit of victory.

Because during the millennia that elapsed between the time when tribal societies were gradually replaced by chiefdom societies and the moment when the Nation-State burst onto the historical scene, war was the exclusive activity of elites who made of it something more than a profession or a way of life. In the words of Barbara Ehrenreich (1), a true religion, centered on heroism, solidarity among comrades, loyalty to the chief, the exaltation of death in combat — the most worthy and desirable way to meet one's end — and the provocation of intense emotions through participation in war and, in times of peace, through the repetitive recollection of past deeds.

> Warriors
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> For those who did not wage war — peasants, for example, who often found themselves caught in the midst of warring hordes — war can be a catastrophe of the dimensions of a plague or a famine. But for the warrior, war is life itself, or at the very least, the good life, the kind that women and peasants can never fully share. War provides him with adventure, camaraderie, intense emotions, proof of his manhood, possibly new territories and spoils, and, furthermore, the ever-present possibility of a 'glorious death,' which, rather than death, means eternal fame. Between one war and the next, the warrior keeps the memory of these gifts alive by reciting epic poems and songs of heroic deeds, relives them in duels and tournaments, and celebrates them with martial pomp. The warrior elites of ancient times would have recognized

themselves in the words of the young *freikorpsmann* who wrote, shortly after the First World War, 'They told us the War was over. That made us laugh. We ourselves are the War' (1).

Membership in these warrior elites was achieved primarily by birth into them. They always drew a thick line of separation between themselves and the mass of peasants and artisans upon whom they depended for their subsistence and for the supply of weapons (swords, armor, horses...), a mass upon whom they imposed slavery or other forms of subjugation.

Warriors

The warrior elite needs to be fed and, in part because of the muscular energy expenditure that their way of fighting entails, must be fed better than those who devote themselves to cultivating the fields. They also need clothing and lodging. And their horses likewise require care, food and shelter. But the warrior never sows nor harvests and, from the point of view of common people, can only be considered a producer of catastrophes and deaths. The Cretan warriors of the 19th century BC sang, perhaps with pride, or maybe with a certain irony: 'My wealth is my spear and my sword, and the solid shield that protects my flesh; with them I plow, with them I harvest, with them I tread the sweet wine from the grapes, with them I acquire the right to rule over the serfs' (1).

In any case, warriors have almost always preferred to see themselves themselves as the protectors rather than as the parasites of those they subjugated, whose defense would justify their own existence. Indeed, peasants and servants needed to be defended from other warrior hordes, potentially more destructive than their own lords. The position of privilege was likewise justified by a supposed moral superiority, derived from the adoption of ethical and behavioral codes that are surprising in their universality. The *bushido* (code of conduct of the samurai) constitutes a local variant that stands out more for its rigorism than for its originality.

Warriors. The samurai bushido

> The bushido is, therefore, the code of moral principles that knights were to observe, and in which they were instructed. It is not a written code; at best, it consists of a few maxims that were passed down by word of mouth or that came from the pen of some famous warrior or scholar [...] It does not derive from the ideas of a single mind, however capable it may have been, nor from the life of a single individual, however famous they may have been. It was formed from an organic development of decades and centuries of military career (3).

Among the elites or warrior castes that dominated the great Empires of Antiquity, or the barbarian armies that moved about with their slaves, equally plundering, occupying and cultivating territories (their slaves, of course), or leasing their military activity to the Romans, or the armies of Mongol horsemen who, rather than subjugating the peasant populations, preferred to plunder and exterminate them, or the samurai and the European feudal knights... there exists a link that goes beyond the obviousness of their practicing the same profession. All of them felt proud to belong to one ancient lineage or another and eager to display their emblems, all of them saw themselves as profoundly different from the peasants and other industrious groups, with whom they avoided mingling, all found in camaraderie, obedience to their chief, and the emotions that war arouses the meaning of their existence, all of them extolled war as the highest of human activities, and all, with few exceptions, elevated death on the battlefield as the most desirable of fates.

And it is that the members of the traditional warrior elites were prepared from their earliest childhood to accept — and even actively seek — a heroic death in the heat of battle, as well as to submit to a chief and share their fate with other warriors like themselves. They needed one another as much as the air they breathed. They had been educated to *live permanently on a war footing*, or at least they tried to. To that end, they had to acquire certain knowledge, hone specific skills, and submit to a discipline particular to the profession. But that was not enough to be a brave warrior. It was also necessary to maintain a special state of mind, which can only be interpreted as a *paranoid activation*, in which the recurring themes of the paranoid universe emerge in a transparent manner: loyalty to *highly cohesive groups*, *cognitive rigidity*, obsession with *enemies* (a role that, in this case, is played by other warriors)… and the *sense of superiority*.

> Warriors
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> Warriors would undoubtedly have looked upon their fellow human beings from the heights of one who belongs to a far better-endowed species. Their horses granted them a superhu-

man stature, their armor served as gleaming exoskeletons from which sharpened weapons protruded in the manner of fangs and claws, and their coats of arms sometimes proclaimed their kinship with lions, leopards, eagles, or other terrifying animals (1).

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