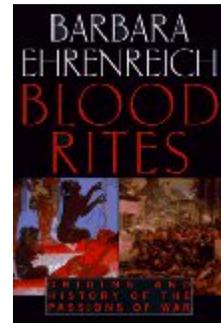


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Ehrenreich. *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. x + 292 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8050-5787-4; \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-5077-6.

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Over the past few years, widely discussed books in the United States have proclaimed the end of art, of literature and of science. By contrast, people have largely even ceased to speculate about an end to war. For the most part, war now seems to be accepted as an inevitable part of the human condition.

As so often, it is the strangest things that people are most inclined to take for granted. Viewed externally, nothing could be more blatantly irrational than war. This is not to say that individual wars may not often be justified on purely pragmatic grounds, but the rhetoric of war points to reasons that are far from utilitarian. Many people have spoken of war in ecstatic terms. Even those who ostensibly protest against war often seem, though their rhetoric, to glory vicariously in the danger and the brutality.

Blood Rites by Barbara Ehrenreich is an attempt to explain the phenomenon of war. The author is best known as a left-wing journalist. As a scholar, she is an amateur, but there ought to be no stigma in that. Professionals in the world of scholarship are now unwilling to address larger themes. In response to a crisis in their finances and influence, scholars at American universities have become more rigid and, thereby, more specialized. When they touch at large questions at all, it is generally under the cover of professional jargon, which provides a guarantee of deniability ("That isn't really what I said"). As intellectual leaders, academics of today have abdicated, leaving the important questions to journalists and other amateurs.

The question raised in this book, then, is "Why war?" For many people, the answer will simply be, "Why not?" To be taken seriously, in other words, the author needs

to convince people that there is a problem here at all. To dramatize the strangeness of war, she relates it to something that people do not take for granted—animal sacrifice.

This still retains power to stir violent emotions. Even educated Americans still often think of Santaria and Voudoun, folk religions of Latin America and the Caribbean which practice animal sacrifice, as satanic. Ritualistic killing of animals is variously perceived as barbaric superstition or, still worse, as a sadistic exercise designed to coarsen and brutalize the perpetrators. Ehrenreich takes as her starting point the claim of the Swiss classical Scholar Walter Burkert that the symbolism of hunting, ritual sacrifice and war are largely the same.

War then, is as crazy as killing a lamb in church! But, after all, communion with the ritual division of the body and blood of Christ does re-enact an ancient totem sacrifice. Symbolism of blood and sacrifice pervades all major religions, even when it is no longer practiced. Still more significantly, from the point of view of Ehrenreich's book, is that the institution provides us with the secular language of war as well. Young people sent out to kill and be killed are referred to as a "sacrifice."

Again, borrowing an idea of Burkert, she speculates that blood sacrifice, of either animals or human beings, was originally an offering to placate predators, which were prone to attack human settlements. War, then, addresses an archaic terror of predation that pervaded much of our history as hominids, when we were fairly defenseless prey to wolves and leopards. Early divinities, she argues, were perceived primarily as predators. Sacrifice was food of the gods, and Yahweh, for example, accepts Abel's sacrifice of meat while disdaining Cain's

offering of fruit and vegetables.

War came through imitation of predators, at once dreaded and admired. It offered the spoils for the victorious and a glorious death in battle for the defeated. Gradually, however, the warrior elites faced increasing resentment from civilians. Religions such as Christianity and Buddhism found greater meaning in contemplation or in charity than in conquest. It was necessary to sacralize war through pageantry drawn from religious ceremony. Thus we have the entire paraphernalia of war including banners, uniforms, insignia, parades and martial music.

The codes and rituals surrounding warfare have constantly broken down and been redefined, as they have had to accommodate new technologies, political systems and terrain. The modern period, for example, brought a democratization of war, as common people for the first time shared both the obligation of risk and the prospect of glory. The chivalrous ideals were already decaying in the eighteenth century, and they broke down almost completely during the two global conflicts of the early twentieth.

The democratization of war continues, as it is increasingly opened to women and even children. With Rambo, we now have a martial hero who can dispense not only with knightly codes but also with nationalism. Yet all these changes, extensive as some of them may be, leave the basic activity untouched. It is not irrevocably tied to ceremony, nationalism or even masculinity.

I am somewhat unconvinced by the argument of Ehrenreich that war originates in the combined imitation of and defense against predators going back to a time when human beings were relatively vulnerable to attacks. For one thing, I find it is not entirely consistent with the symbolism of war. The martial elites used as their emblems not only carnivorous animals such as the lion and wolf but also powerful herbivores such as the boar and steer. Still more significantly, warriors tend to find greater glory in defeat than in victory.

Even in the United States, a country generally lacking in tragic sensibility, we remember the American defeat at the Alamo with far more passion than the eventual Amer-

ican victory in the Mexican War. Similarly, Custer's Last Stand appeals to the imagination in America far more than all of the victories settlers achieved over the Indians put together. Epics of warriors from *The Iliad* to *The Song of Roland* and *The Song of the Nibelungs* are overwhelmingly tragic. Ehrenreich, I suspect, may exaggerate the impetus to victory and, therefore, the rationality of war.

We may equate defeat with the position of prey, but the position plainly has enormous romantic appeal. Rather than a one-sided emulation of predators, I suggest that the lure of war is a return to some original condition, in which we were as much the hunted as the hunters. If this is so, however, the romance of war is based on only the most tenuous of analogies.

While it is easy enough to find analogues to war in the behavior of various animals from ants to chimpanzees, war still impresses me as a uniquely human activity, with respect to purposes as well as scale. Some animals and plants may indeed defend themselves using chemicals, yet none will decimate a habitat with poisons. While it might indeed be within their power, no group of apes, so far as I know, will destroy the trees of another.

This might suggest that war is a product of our technological civilization, yet the reverse is at least as true. Since the early refinements in spear points, war has provided much of the impetus behind technological innovation. The need for heavy weaponry produced the foundries of early modern Europe, while the two World Wars led to the use of atomic power. Still more recently, Vietnam and the succession of conflicts known collectively as "the Cold War" were quickly followed by the computer revolution. Paradoxically, war tends to be viewed by both advocates and critics as a reenactment of some primal condition. For all its destruction, it continually holds out a promise of bonding with the natural world. Many delusions are propagated during war, but that is probably the greatest deception of them all.

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