## H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack S. Levy, William R. Thompson. *The Arc of War: Origins, Escalation, and Transformation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xi + 282 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-47628-5; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-47629-2.

Reviewed by Molly Clever (University of Maryland) Published on H-War (June, 2012) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson's *The Arc of War: Origins, Escalation, and Transformation* provides a timely and much-needed comprehensive theory of warfare that takes on the challenge of providing a geographically inclusive and historically broad account of the origins, escalations, and transformations of war. That the authors accomplish this immense undertaking in just over two hundred pages in a manner that is both accessible and concise is remarkable. Their syntheses and integration of research and theories from a wide range of academic areas–including archeology, anthropology, history, political science, and sociology–make *The Arc of War* an appealing text for those who approach the study of war from vastly different perspectives.

Levy and Thompson propose a coevolutionary theory of warfare in which six main "ingredients"-technology, military and political organization, political economy, threat environment, and warfare-interact in complex ways whereby a significant change in one sphere leads to significant changes in the other five, leading to periodic revolutionary accelerations in warfare. While they acknowledge that each of these six spheres is essential to understanding transformations in war broadly, they identify macrochanges in political economy-for example, the shift from hunter-gatherer practices to settled agriculture-as the primary driver in evolutionary change historically, with the threat environment and political organization also emerging as highly significant primary drivers, while military organization and weapons technology are typically secondary drivers of the evolutionary process.

The authors identify three evolutionary accelerations of note: the first in Bronze Age Mesopotamia, the second in Iron Age China and the eastern Mediterranean, and the third in modern industrializing Europe, from roughly 1500 to 1946. Each of these accelerations was associated with massive transformations and increased intensity of warfare that in turn shaped global interactions and the

nature of war in each successive phase. They also emphasize that for much of the non-Western world, the third acceleration was not experienced firsthand; thus the arc of war operates very differently in the global South, where states outside the Western trajectory "tend to be weaker and markedly vulnerable to internal warfare, and they fight fewer and shorter interstate wars" (p. 16).

Their path-dependent model acknowledges a number of different trajectories of war-for example, an Andean trajectory that differs from the Mesopotamian trajectory, which is distinct from a Chinese trajectory, and so on. What each trajectory has in common is that in each one, it is "paradigmatic armies (and navies) that develop the innovations that fuel what we call coevolutionary change" (p. 156). Each trajectory is marked by a military-political power becoming the predominant regional leader in successive phases of centralization, competition, and decentralization, with each successive power incorporating technological and organizational lessons learned from the previous regional leader in an evolutionary fashion.

The main utility of this coevolutionary theory is its embrace of the notion that the nature of warfare is a moving target. Rather than attempting to identify a unified causal relationship whereby the nature of war transforms, the authors identify the six main spheres which interact to produce such transformations and then use these tools to analyze cases in varying geographical and historical contexts. This approach provides a theoretical approach which is sufficiently broad to cover the entire historical and geographical scope of war, while remaining flexible enough to be readily applied to specific cases in a manner which can provide new insights and help answer a broad array of questions.

The coevolutionary theory of war advanced in the *Arc* of *War* is immensely novel and useful, and yet the authors miss out on an important opportunity to engage with the history of colonialism, and particularly the racialized

colonialism developed by the European powers during the third acceleration, and its impact on the non-Western trajectory. Although it is not the authors' task to deal with every aspect of each of these trajectories, the absence of an explicit discussion of colonialism is surprising given that two chapters of the book are devoted to comparing the Western and non-Western trajectories of war and the differences between them. Their claim that the third acceleration was not experienced firsthand by the non-Western world becomes questionable when one considers that racialized colonialism was an innovation of the European powers during the third acceleration and used as a tool of war against the non-Western world. It is

the key to understanding, in my view, the differences in the threat environments between the industrialized and non-industrialized worlds, and therefore the key to unraveling the possibilities for each of these trajectories in the near future.

Although I was disappointed that Levy and Thompson did not explicitly deal with the role of colonialism in the wars of the third acceleration, their coevolutionary theory does not preclude such an analysis, but rather encourages it to be done by others. They provide a set of theoretical tools whose applicability extends far beyond what it attempts in a work that is generalizable, adaptable, and remarkably concise.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Molly Clever. Review of Levy, Jack S.; Thompson, William R., *The Arc of War: Origins, Escalation, and Transformation.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35500



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.