

Introduction

The Social Anatomy of Fighting

Human history is often narrated as a story of fighting. The earliest written records including engravings in clay tokens, limestone tablets, ancient monuments, and antique documents contain extensive descriptions of human belligerence. For example, one of the early etchings found in the ruins of ancient Near East settlements and attributed to Ashurnasirpal II, king of Assyria from 884 to 859 BCE, is completely centred on the experience of fighting and killing. The inscription depicts Ashurnasirpal's first military campaign that involved quashing an armed rebellion in the city of Suru in 883 BCE. This record provides a detailed depiction of close-range human-on-human violence:

I flayed all the chiefs who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins. Some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes and others I bound to stakes round the pillar. I cut the limbs off the officers who had rebelled. Many captives I burned with fire and many I took as living captives. From some I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers, of many I put out their eyes. I made one pillar of the living and another of heads and I bound their heads to tree trunks round about the city. Their young men and maidens I consumed with fire. The rest of their warriors I consumed with thirst in the desert of the Euphrates. (Finegan 2015: 170–1)

Other ancient and early modern written accounts also contain numerous descriptions of close-range fighting including wars, rebellions, uprisings, insurgencies, assassinations, acts of rioting and massacres of civilians (Bestock 2018; Classen 2004; D'Huys 1987). Similarly, the history textbooks published over the last three centuries are full of extensive depictions of violent conflicts where soldiers, police officers, revolutionaries, rebels, insurgents, terrorists, protesters, paramilitaries, and ordinary individuals fight and kill other human beings (Bentrovato et al. 2016; Ferro 2004). The military scholarship from Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz to the contemporary neo-realism of Waltz and Mearsheimer has identified fighting as a crucial element of social and political order. As Clausewitz (2008 [1832]: 227) emphasises: 'Fighting is the central military act; all other activities merely support it. Its nature

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consequently needs close examination. Engagements mean fighting. The object of fighting is the destruction or defeat of the enemy.’

This focus on fighting is not only discernible in the writings of political, military, and cultural elites but is also present among ordinary populations. For example, the numerous memoirs of former soldiers often contain graphic descriptions of combat. A typical example is the following description from Myron Napier Bartlett, a former combatant who fought in the American Civil War (1861–5). He narrates his battlefield experience in *A Soldier's Story of War*:

The enemy had ... the advantage in position ... Every shot they fired tore through our ranks, killing and wounding the men, and smashing the pieces ... In the progress of the battle twenty-three of our horses were killed, and nine men killed and twelve wounded ... Lieutenant Brewer sent word to his friends at home that he had tried to live like a Christian and die like a soldier. He was buried at night in St James church yard, with the bodies of other of our own men, who died on the same battlefield. (Bartlett 1874: 111–12)

Religious scriptures including the Bible, Qur'an, and Tanakh also make extensive reference to human-on-human fighting and killing. In some cases, violence is proscribed as a sinful act while in other instances fighting and killing are justified with direct reference to one's religious duty. Thus, the book of Joshua in the Old Testament (6:21) depicts divinely sanctioned violence where God instructs his obedient believers to annihilate all the inhabitants of Canaan: 'At the edge of the sword they utterly destroyed everything in the city – man and woman, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys' (The Holy Bible 2008: 695). The sword verse of Qur'an also refers to human-on-human violence in the context of religious belief: 'And slay them wherever you find them and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter ... and fight them until fitnah is no more, and religion is for Allah' (The Qur'an 2008: 2:191). Similarly, in the Torah (2010), Book of Deuteronomy (13:1–11), fighting and killing human beings is justified on religious grounds. The worshipping of other gods is a mortal sin: 'you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them. But you shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people. Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'

Close-range acts of violence are also depicted extensively in contemporary mass media (Bushman 2017; Grimes et al. 2008). Although current sensibilities entail issuing warnings before images of violence are shown to the public, there is no shortage of such images in popular

media. The editors of most news programmes are still guided by a sensationalist impulse and acts of human violence receive prominent and widespread media coverage (often following the infamous journalistic motto ‘if it bleeds, it leads’). In a similar vein, much of the entertainment industry focuses on fighting and close-range violence: from crime novels, violent films, and TV programmes to computer games, martial arts shows, and re-enactments of battles, among others (Wittekind 2012).

Nevertheless, this imagistic obsession with fighting and killing has less to do with the historical and contemporary reality of violence and much more with the social concerns of groups that generate and use such images. Rather than simply reflecting reality the proliferation of violent imagery often serves specific organisational or ideological goals. In this sense the traditional narratives of fighting and killing cannot be taken at face value. Conventional depictions of historical violence often exaggerate and, in some instances, completely fabricate the events and experiences of combat (Bestock 2018; Malešević 2017).

The earliest accounts of mass killings that are attributed to ancient rulers such as Ashurnasirpal II cannot be read as records of actual events. These descriptions were not intended to impart factual information but were deliberately written in a hyperbolic language of gruesome violence to send a message to anybody who would threaten the rule of the emperor. As Bestock (2018: 5) rightly points out in the context of ancient Egypt, ‘committing violence and making pictures of it are fundamentally different tactics of power, regardless of the “realism” of the image’. The ancient and many pre-modern inscriptions of violence often served as a tactical political manoeuvre and a didactic tool for one’s own population as well as for potential enemies. The primary function of such texts was to depict the ruler as omnipotent and beyond reproach and in this context the focus was on conveying a sense of fear, awe, and reverence. The same logic can be applied to the religious scriptures where hyperbole and symbols were deployed to strike fear and ensure obedience among the believers. Such traditional narratives of violence cannot tell us much about the social dynamics of fighting and killing. Rather than providing realistic accounts of the combat experience such texts tell us much more about the symbolic value of violence in the official representations. Such texts use violent images as a means of communication and representation within and between societies. As such, their focus is not on depicting the reality of violence at all.

Contemporary representations of violence are more realistic and often grounded in facts about experiences from wars, revolutions, genocides, uprisings, everyday policing, gangsterism, or terrorist acts. Nevertheless,

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the media portrayals of fighting remain centred on providing dramatic, sensational, and coherent narrative plots where violent excesses receive more attention than the non-excessive but much more common acts of violence (Goldstein, 1998). Furthermore, in such narratives fighting often tends to be completely decontextualised or mischaracterised by being framed into already established representations of a specific conflict (Galtung and Ruge 1965). In this sense a particular violent episode can be used for ideological or more narrowly propagandistic purposes. In times of war, a violent act can be utilised to denounce or delegitimise the actions of the enemy or to justify the behaviour of one's own side (i.e., monstrous acts of the cowardly enemy vs. noble and brave fighting of 'our boys'). In more peaceful contexts, episodes of violent behaviour (gang fights, pub brawls, football fan hooliganism, etc.) can be used to advance a specific ideological doctrine (e.g., calls for tougher prison sentences, more police, or alternatively for addressing rising inequalities or rampant unemployment). Thus, descriptions of violence can never be taken at face value but require contextual and historical decoding.

Nevertheless, this abundance of violent narrative representations stands in stark contrast with the actual experience of face-to-face fighting and killing which is remarkably rare (Collins 2008, 2011). Despite the numerous visual and textual representations of close-range violence throughout history, face-to-face fighting has been and remains an atypical social phenomenon. Even the professional purveyors of coercive power such as soldiers, police officers, military contractors, members of paramilitary organisations, gangsters and many others rarely experience hand-to-hand fighting. The technological and organisational developments of the last three centuries have made close contact unnecessary for the successful conduct of many military and policing operations. Since the early nineteenth century, fighting at a distance has become the dominant way in which militaries operate. Most soldiers die from long-distance weaponry: drones, missiles, cannon fire, tank projectiles and shells, airplane bombs, grenades, mines, and bullets. In many wars soldiers rarely if ever see their opponents as much of the fighting takes place at a substantial distance. Military scholars have demonstrated convincingly that in modern warfare very few soldiers find themselves in a situation of fighting face to face (Bourke 2000; Grossman 1996; Holmes 1985; Keegan 1994). For example, during the Second World War, more than 95 per cent of British military casualties were inflicted at distance with 85 per cent of fatalities being caused by aerial bombing, artillery shells, mortars and grenades, anti-tank shells and bullets (Holmes 1985: 210). Although face-to-face fighting was more common

before modern times, it was still rarely practised as a form of combat. Many pre-modern military organisations utilised alternative modes of fighting in order to avoid direct contact. The Greek and Roman phalanx armies waged wars as pushing matches with a clear focus on breaking the front line of the enemy phalanx whereas the medieval European armies avoided direct confrontation by laying sieges around the towns and major castles in an attempt to exhaust the enemy (Collins 2008; Keegan 1994; Malešević 2010). Many other armies throughout history used ambushes, periodic raids, force concentration, surprise attacks, encirclement of the enemy forces, or unexpected attacks at night all of which minimised the possibility of close-range fighting. For example, the famous battle of the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) fought around the Trebia river in 218 BCE between the Roman army led by Sempronius Longus and the Carthaginian forces under Hannibal was a successful ambush. Hannibal's concealed forces surprised the Roman army by attacking them from the rear. This strategic advantage allowed the Carthaginians to defeat the large Roman forces and in this *melée* half of the Roman army of 40,000 soldiers were killed (Erdkamp 2015). However, most of them died while retreating and very few soldiers were involved in face-to-face confrontation.

The conventional images of war with vast battlefields where huge militaries face each other in direct and protracted combat, as often portrayed in popular culture, are far from being an accurate representation of the overwhelming majority of violent conflicts throughout history (Collins 2008; Holmes 1985; Keegan 1994, Malešević 2010). Most fighting is nothing like that. Instead, violent conflicts are often messy, chaotic, unpredictable, and significantly over-reliant on complex technology and organisation. In many cases they are also fought at substantial distance.

The same applies to the popular representations of violence in revolutions, uprisings, insurgencies, paramilitarism, policing, genocide, or terrorism (Lawson 2019; Üngör 2020; Wilson 2020). In most conventional narratives of violent conflict, fighting is depicted as an almost automatic response of combatants, something that does not require much explanation. However, fighting is a complex social phenomenon that is context dependent and highly variable.

The key paradox here is that despite such profusion of popular representations of violence we still do not know enough about the specific social mechanisms that make fighting and killing possible. The conventional depictions of close-range fighting often tend to reproduce stereotypical, formulaic, and almost identical narratives centred on providing morality tales instead of attempting to understand the social dynamics of

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fighting. In other words, although images of fighting have received a colossal amount of attention throughout history and are even more widely represented today, there is little engagement with the sociological processes that underpin social fights. The social dynamics of face-to-face violent confrontation is still largely under-analysed, under-theorised, and not well understood. There is a plethora of descriptive narratives that zoom in on the experience of combatants in different conflicts. Nevertheless, such narratives are rarely analysed and contextualised using the conceptual and explanatory tools of sociology. At the same time, conventional sociology remains largely uninterested in the study of close-range violence. Although fighting and killing are quintessentially social experiences these phenomena have, for the most part, been neglected by mainstream sociological theory and research. One of the principal aims of this book is to deploy sociological tools to understand the social processes that make close-range fighting possible.

1.1 Understanding Social Pugnacity

In this book I explore why and under which social conditions human beings are likely to fight, injure, or kill other human beings in combat situations. In this context I analyse the role of biology, economic motivations, ideological commitments, coercive pressure, and the emotional bonds of micro-solidarity. Drawing on a variety of primary and secondary research I also study the structural contexts that make fighting possible as well as how and when individuals avoid involvement with close-range violence. The book offers a sociological analysis of the combat zone and the role organisational power plays in the development of group cohesion. I explore the role that emotions play in people's willingness to fight and especially how shared emotional dynamics shape the experience of killing in violent conflicts.

The focal point of this study is the experience of fighting in a variety of group contexts. The conventional definitions interpret fighting as a form of purposeful violent social conflict aimed at establishing dominance over one's opponent (Kellett 2013). In this sense, fighting is often perceived to be a means to an end – a tool of political, economic, ideological, or military power. While the structural contexts influence and shape the trajectories of violence, social fighting is rarely, or ever, just an instrument of external forces. Instead, social fights possess a *sui generis* quality, they develop their own logic and their own social dynamics that influences the actions and thoughts of individuals who take part in combat. A social fight represents an autonomous human experience that generates its own sociological consequences. Individuals involved in violent

fighting are profoundly moulded by this experience and in turn they also shape the experiences of other people – the combatants and the non-combatants.

In the conventional understanding, fighting is perceived to be a tool of power or an instrument of self-preservation. Human beings are seen as creatures who fight for domination over others or for their own survival (Gat 2006; Martin 2018; Pinker 2011). However, such reductionist views misunderstand the structural complexity and the sociability of fighting. Just as human sexuality cannot be reduced to procreation but involves complex emotional and cognitive interactions, the same applies to social fighting. The experience of fighting generates strong emotional responses, and it impacts on knowledge and understanding of one's social environment and the groups involved in combat. The individuals who share protracted fighting experience often form unique emotional bonds which impact on their joint social action. In contrast to dominant biological, psychological, and economic views of combatants as individual self-preservers, it is essential to analyse fighting first and foremost as a social phenomenon. As Simmel (1971 [1908]: 70) pointed out long ago, conflict is a form of sociation. It is a social act aimed at resolving divergent dualism in order to attain unity, even if this involves the physical destruction of one's opponent. In this sense fighting as a form of violent conflict involves deep social interaction between the two hostile sides. Close-range fighting is premised on the existence of physical and mental contact between the combatants. The individuals involved in a fight develop emotional and cognitive reactions and as such establish interaction with their opponents. Thus, fighting entails active sociation. As a rule, the combatants are not indifferent towards their enemy. Instead, they are socially engaged with their fighting opponents. Thus, the experience of combat is a form of positive sociation. In Simmel's (1971 [1908]: 71) view, this differentiates conflict from disinterest: 'whether it implies the rejection or the termination of sociation, indifference is purely negative. In contrast to such pure negativity, conflict contains something positive. Its positive and negative aspects, however, are integrated: they can be separated conceptually, but not empirically.'

Obviously fighting is not necessarily an act involving opponents of equal strength. On the contrary many social fights are highly asymmetrical (Collins 2008). Even in situations of symmetry some combatants might show unwillingness or inability to fight, or they might change their attitudes while fighting and decide to switch sides or stop their involvement. The key issue here is that the experience of fighting is dynamic, situational, and variable.

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To better understand the social dynamics of close-range fighting, it is necessary to focus one's attention on the phenomenon of social pugnacity. Although the conventional use of the term pugnacity often implies inherent aggressiveness, the intimidating or confrontational character of an individual, the original Latin term is more neutral.¹ The terms pugna, pugno, and pugnatum, mean fighting, fight, battle, struggle, or dispute (Simpson 2000). In this context I use the concept of social pugnacity to capture the relational, changeable, and collective character of close-range fighting. Social pugnacity is not an individual attribute, it is not a product of one's biology or psychology, but a phenomenon generated by the contextual interplay between structure and agency. In other words, social pugnacity is a collectively engendered phenomenon that results from the cumulative action of social organisations, ideological diffusion, and micro-interactional dynamics. The trajectory of fighting is shaped by what Go and Lawson (2017: 3) call 'entities in motion' – 'the contextually bound, historically situated configurations of events and experiences that constitute social fields'. In this relational understanding, social pugnacity is not an inherent quality of an individual or a group but a relational response produced by the confluence of different structures, actors, and events. Simply put, human relations are not defined by fixed biological, psychological, or other characteristics but are created through the interactions of specific social organisations, ideological frames, and micro-interactional processes. This means that fighting and killing are not uniform, transhistorical and transcultural practices with fixed and recognisable patterns but are diverse, variable, and context-dependent phenomena. However, this is not to say that there is nothing common in the practices and perceptions of fighting across time and space. On the contrary, and this will become visible throughout the book, many combatants describe their own experiences of close-range fighting in similar terms. The point is that there is no single and typical response to violence that one could associate with all conflicts, all combat situations, and all combatants. Instead, the close-range violent action transpires in variety of forms and some of these

¹ One of the earliest uses of the term pugnacity in social sciences was by William McDougall in *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908). However, he deployed this term in a biological determinist and racist way where pugnacity was just a synonym for innate violent tendencies. Hence, he regularly refers to 'the instinct of pugnacity'. For example, he states that 'The races of men certainly differ greatly in respect to the innate strength of this instinct [of pugnacity]; but there is no reason to think that it has grown weaker among ourselves under centuries of civilisation; rather, it is probable, as we shall see presently, that it is stronger in the European peoples than it was in primitive man' (McDougall 2015 [1908]: 285).

forms might share similarities with other conflicts and other combat experiences. At the same time, other experiences of close-range fighting might have no adequate equivalents elsewhere.

The same applies to the role of biology, psychology, and economics in violence. While all human beings possess some universal physiological, anatomical, and other biological predispositions it is the specific social and historical contexts that make fighting possible in some cases and unlikely in others. However, the sheer variety of combat realities and diverse historical experiences does not imply that every situation of close-range violence is inimitable and incomparable. Obviously, in some trivial sense all human experiences are unique and unrepeatable. Nevertheless, social science aims to make sense of these unique experiences in order to provide generalisable findings about human behaviour. Hence relational analyses of social phenomena aim to identify common configurations without reducing them to a number of fixed variables or static categories of analysis.

The concept of social pugnacity aims to encapsulate this social, cultural, and historical flexibility of the combat experience. It aims to situate fighting in its distinct social environment by exploring its contextual dynamics through sociological lenses. In this understanding social pugnacity is not a property of an individual combatant or of a specific collectivity but a social process that is shaped by a variety of agents and structural forces. In my analysis I explore the impact of different structural powers on the dynamics of fighting including economic, political, cultural, and military factors. In particular I focus on the rise and fall of organisational capacity and the extent of ideological penetration within a group. I also analyse the influence of shared biological prerequisites, psychological variables, and micro-interactional processes. In this context my analysis zooms in especially on the role of emotions in fighting and killing.

I argue that since the phenomenon of close-range fighting emerges in variable social and historical contexts it cannot be explained through the prism of individual motivations. The conventional explanations of fighting usually focus on the motivations of individual combatants ranging from economic self-interest, personality traits, ideological indoctrination, and interpersonal bonds, to individual political commitment. Despite offering very different understandings of motivation all of these individualist perspectives associate fighting with the choices made by individual agents. However, as Clausewitz (2008 [1832]: 78) noted almost two centuries ago, fighting is never an isolated experience that can be reduced to narrow military utility: ‘war is never an isolated act’ and the will of the opponent is regularly ‘dependent on externals’. In other words, the

outbreak and the trajectory of fighting is always moulded by the social environment. Moreover, the character, intensity, timing, and duration of fighting is recurrently determined by specific structural forces such as the organisational capacity of coercive entities that initiate conflict, the extent of ideological penetration within the units involved in fighting, or the ability of coercive organisations to tap into existing micro-level solidarities. Hence the combatants cannot be analysed as social atoms divorced from their social environments and the coercive organisations that spearhead and govern their actions in combat situations.

Furthermore, the collective participation in fighting endangers its own social dynamics. The individuals who are recruited into the specific coercive organisations are almost never the same once they acquire fighting experience. The very act of fighting transforms individuals and generates new social constellations. In this sense social pugnacity is an autonomous phenomenon that can generate new forms of social action. The protracted and shared experience of fighting often creates new social realities that can also impact on the organisational and ideological processes that underpin a specific conflict. This *sui generis* quality of collective fighting is most visible in the changing dynamics of group solidarity in the combat zone. In this context social pugnacity is a distinctly social phenomenon. As I aim to show throughout this book, rather than being a mechanism of domination or self-preservation social pugnacity is in most cases premised on the idea of fighting for (significant) others. Human beings are social creatures that thrive on deep interactions with other humans. As Simmel (1971 [1908]) made clear, these interactions are not necessarily positive and fighting with other human beings is a form of sociation. Nevertheless, a hostile interaction with another human is still an interaction. Wishing to destroy an enemy soldier or a member of a competing gang still involves a whole gamut of cognitive and emotional responses. In contrast an inanimate object such as a rock usually does not receive any reaction or even an acknowledgement. The experience of close-range fighting predisposes a degree of social involvement. It cannot be based on indifference. Even when human beings are completely dehumanised and systematically killed, as in genocides, they are never treated as rocks. There is always social reflection that accompanies the violent action. The Schutzstaffel (SS) troops and the Interahamwe militia justified their killings in reference to specific ideological creeds. The Jews and Tutsis were not killed out of disinterest and indifference. Instead, the genocidal acts were premised on deep involvement and social interaction.

Much of classical sociology from Weber, Marx, and Hintze, to Gumplowicz and Ratzenhofer conceptualised social relations through