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Heroic memory and contemporary war

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Abstract

Inter-State wars seem to have come to an end in the late 1990s; ever since, the global reality of collective violence has come down to the chaos of contemporary civil wars and terrorist attacks. In this article, it will be argued that in today's civil wars, as well as in terrorist violence, the traditional warrior ethos is fading, giving way to types of violence governed by a new psychological and social paradigm. In other words, it is assumed that the very set of values that has universally determined the male gender role and the frame of hegemonic masculinity since time immemorial has also informed the waging of war according to a "heroic regime of violence", and this phenomenon has made war a desirable option for countless generations of young men. On the other hand, the global changes entailed by modernity seem to have undermined this warrior ethos, giving way to a "post-heroic regime" in which extermination-oriented violence, rather than combat-oriented violence, is fostered. In this article, the author will scrutinize the founding psychological and social determinants that have so far upheld the cultural construct of the heroic model, in order to illuminate the ominous consequences of the deculturation of war in today's chaotic conflicts. In such contexts, the men who are fighting[1] suffer from a loss of meaning and the impossibility of gaining dignity and social recognition in an ecosystem of humiliation and ubiquitous violence that has little to do with the expectations of pride and dignity conveyed by the past ideals of heroism associated with a certain vision of masculinity. The article will also discuss ways and means of getting the message of international humanitarian law through to men on the front lines caught up in such circumstances.

Keywords: fighters, heroism, masculinities, armed conflict, terrorism.

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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the 1990s were supposed to mark the emergence of a new international order based on the rule of law. That new order was quickly challenged by a new type of disorder in many parts of the world: a new kind of war emerged, not conventional in the sense of conflicts between States parties to the Geneva Conventions or between a national liberation movement and a colonial power. Today, the reality of war is located somewhere between various forms of civil war, arising from the collapse of States weakened by the upheavals of the modern world, and various forms of murderous and unpredictable attacks that are repeatedly being made by elusive and constantly shifting terrorist groups.[2]

It is against this backdrop that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) started looking at the realities of war on the ground in unprecedented detail. In 1999, at the time of the Geneva Conventions' 50th anniversary, a survey titled *People on War* was carried out in the hope of sparking a discussion about the relevance of the law in the eyes of the fighters and civilians caught up in the terrible civil wars at the end of the last century, and capturing more effectively the psychological and social dimension of the violence and suffering that characterizes contemporary conflicts.[3] It quickly

1 While it is a reality that combatants have historically been predominantly male, it is important to remember that women and girls are also involved in conflict, both as part of the military and fighting forces and through being impacted by sexual and gender-based violence. In this article, the author focuses his reflections on the experiences of men on the front lines.

2 The terms "terrorism" and "civil war" are not defined in international law. As regards terrorism, the author will hereinafter use the definition proposed by Alex P. Schmid, i.e. "an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators." Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1988, p. 28.

"Civil war" is a term that is even harder to define. It no longer refers to the wars of liberation, decolonization or independence that made up the conventional typology of civil wars; rather, it now refers to wars between communal, ethnic and religious groups, such as those that became more common at the end of the twentieth century – wars between "neighbours", certainly, but literally wars "against civilians", who are these conflicts' primary victims. They are infra-State wars, characterized by an outbreak of violence that disrupts the internal structures of a community, whose constituent sub-groups previously coexisted in a common territory and on the basis of balanced compromises. They are wars that originate in an explosion of traumatic events caused by a breakdown in social trust, leading to violence that tears up the social contract.

The recent history of Afghanistan shows how a liberation war can descend dramatically into an "inter-ethnic" civil war: when victory was secured against the Soviet-aligned regime and the Red Army, the war of liberation that had previously been a source of meaning, pride and hope for all involved turned into a fratricidal struggle, absurd but deadly, between rival clans, factions and ethnic groups.

3 The People on War project consisted of a quantitative and qualitative survey of fighters and civilians in twelve regions devastated by war in the second half of the twentieth century: Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Colombia, El Salvador, Georgia and Abkhazia, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia and South Africa. Overall, more than 14,000 civilians and combatants responded to the questionnaire and more than 100 discussion sessions were held, including some in regions that were exceptionally difficult to access. For a first primary synthesis on the quantitative findings of the survey, see ICRC, *The People on War Report: ICRC Worldwide Consultation on the*

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became clear that these so-called "destructured" conflicts, by their very nature, increasingly defied the traditional methods of implementing international humanitarian law.[4]

Part of the data collected was then analyzed by a team of researchers from the Harvard Centre for Health and Human Rights, and three reports were written, interpreting the accounts of people in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Israel and Palestine – regions that had seen major intra-State armed conflicts that are particularly representative of today's forms of collective violence.[5]

The most remarkable finding that emerged from analyzing those accounts was that most of the respondents seemed to offer a sort of meta-narrative, telling of a kind of demoralization that appears common to all, fighters and civilians alike, regardless of the specific context and circumstances. The accounts show a traumatic collective experience, not just caused by the great physical and psychological suffering that people had endured, but apparently connected with the awareness that war had lost its meaning as a social reality. These respondents' experience of violence is a bitter rebuke to the representations, expectations and hopes that war has traditionally conveyed, rightly or wrongly. As noted by the present author and Philippe Cotter:

> An overwhelming majority of those interviewed seemed to share feelings of demoralisation that negated their sense of dignity, be it on a personal or collective level, leaving them crushed by the absurdity and moral disgrace of the violent episodes they had been exposed to either as perpetrators, victims or spectators.[6]

In other words, the witness accounts show that, in 1999, both fighters and civilians saw very clearly that a paradigm shift had occurred in the way that wars were being conducted around the world at the time. In their view, the state of war, which had traditionally conveyed meaning and hopes of heroism, regardless of how brutal the fighting was, had turned into an outburst of extreme violence from which it was impossible to derive any dignity or pride. The experience of that violence contradicted all principles, all representations, all values inherited from the past and traditionally associated with war.

The inevitable conclusion is that, for those who have experienced these contexts, war has come to mean a fundamentally humiliating experience, not just

Rules of War, Geneva, October 1999, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/people-war-report-icrc-worldwide-consultation-rules-war (all internet references were accessed in July 2019).

4 For an illustration of the dilemmas arising in the post-Cold War period regarding methods of implementing humanitarian law, see Dr Dale Stephens' critical discussion entitled "Behaviour in War: The Place of Law, Moral Inquiry and Self-Identity", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 96, No. 895–896, 2014.

5 Gilbert Holleufer, Jennifer Leaning and Nancy Briton, "Afghanistan: Country Report", "Bosnia-Herzegovina: Country Report" and "Israel and Palestine: Country Report", in *The Harvard People on War Project*, 2002. Unpublished, on file with author.

6 Gilbert Holleufer and Philippe Cotter, *Humiliation and War*, Eclectica Editions, Geneva, 2010, p. 12. This one-off publication, in which the authors borrow from the People on War project discussed in this article, summarizes the main results of the research carried out at Harvard.

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for the victims exposed to the kind of barbarity with which we are all too familiar, but also for the fighters, who it throws into a state of alienation that cannot be made sense of retrospectively, and whose "heroic" aspirations it has undermined. Both civilians and fighters are deprived of the sense of purpose that is fundamental to every human's self-esteem and sense of dignity, including and perhaps especially during war.

Brought together, the often heart-rending accounts given by the men fighting these civil wars show that all veterans of such conflicts tend to paint the same picture of a masculinity that has become literally pathetic in these unexpected circumstances. Everywhere, there is the sense of people "going mad" collectively, and there is the repeated insistence that what these men have been through "was not a war". Many of them describe the same experience, initially thinking that they were "going off to fight a just war" before having their heroic aspirations crushed by the reality of an endless slaughter that no longer involves any actual combat or victory. In both Bosnia and Afghanistan, men – or women speaking about their men – talk about the depression, shame and despair that haunt the "warriors" who, having returned from the "front line", receive hardly any recognition of their heroism.[7] These accounts clearly show that it is impossible to derive any "glory" from the experience of armed violence in wars in which no one, not even the fighters, recognizes any of the "noble" values that are commonly shared by warriors.

In conventional armed forces, the disconnect between the reality on the ground and "learned" expectations is just as demoralizing. When an Israeli soldier, "invincible" on the battlefield, is confronted with boys and girls throwing stones at him, his power becomes the most complete powerlessness. A similar feeling of powerlessness is probably felt by all soldiers around the world who are "prepared to face anything, but not that" when confronted by wars consisting of ambushes, traps and treacherous attacks, which undermine the expectations instilled in them by their training and their social learning of the warrior ethos. Their loss of bearings and their powerlessness are so unbearable that they lead to feelings of searing humiliation on the ground. As we know, in modern armed forces, this can lead to responses that are morally unacceptable even when adopted in the name of the "conventional" ethics of a "just war", such as the renewed use of torture in Iraq as a means justified by the new ends of the "war on terror".

Overall, the messages received from those witnessing these civil wars are valuable because, as well as revealing the suffering and feelings of helplessness caused by local circumstances, they point to a deeper, more general breakdown of the time-honoured logic of war as a concept, as opposed to that of specific wars. The stories told by veterans of the First World War or the Vietnam War, among countless others, reveal circumstances that led to a similar loss of meaning of war for combatants. However, we can see that the end of the Cold War created the conditions for an unprecedented "deculturation of war": concerns hitherto that

7 *Ibid.*

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war would simply become increasingly destructive gave way to the concern that dehumanizing feelings and attitudes would take root when collective, armed violence was used within imploding communities. Since the 1990s, while most States have been strengthened by the interdependence arising from globalization, the civil wars that have suddenly erupted in the most fragile communities have become the dominant paradigm of collective violence. After the Cold War, wars have mainly arisen not because States are strong, but because they are weak. In this article it will be argued that in contemporary civil wars, the heroic warrior ethos is fading, giving way to new violent behaviours governed by a new psychological and social paradigm that needs to be better understood if we are to measure its overall consequences.

War and heroic memory

War is a cultural and social construct, and while it displays various gendered dimensions, it has the specific feature of reflecting the masculine gender role within the species,[8] instead of relating to any one culture.[9] The explanation of why warrior behaviours persist over time, like anything relating to the human condition, lies in the complex interaction between humans' deepest psychological infrastructures and the cultural and social superstructures that humans have been able to build on the foundations of their unconscious mental processes. This investigation, brief as it is, will require us to move constantly between the two sides of that interaction, and this shapes the way the argument is organized. It is in this interaction that we see the repression and denial of psychological suffering combined with culture's adoption of a selective memory, one that glorifies the use of force according to the heroic warrior ethos,[10] organizing the history of communities around a universal heroic narrative. This fatal combination, according to the present author, has determined the identity and role of the masculine gender since time immemorial. Using knowledge acquired through

8 Maryam Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2011. The term "toxic masculinity" is also affiliated with war: see Robert W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed., Polity Press, Oxford, 2005; Michael S Kimmel, Jeff Hearn and Robert W Connell (eds), *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005.

9 However, see M. S Kimmel, J. Hearn and R. W Connell (eds), above note 8, pointing to the influence of both gender and culture in shaping masculine norms. From the anthropological point of view, the roles of the masculine and feminine genders must under no circumstances be confused with biological characteristics. Many women have taken on the gender role traditionally assigned to men in a wide range of cultures, fighting on the front line "like men". Female Kurdish fighters, who played a "heroic" role in the war of liberation conducted by their community against the Islamic State group, are currently the best-known example, but there have been many others in the past. For more on masculine gender roles, see R.W. Connell, above note 8. "To speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. Masculinities are not equivalent to men; they concern the *position* of men in a gender order. They can be defined as the patterns of practice by which people (both men and women, though predominantly men) engage that position": Raewyn Connell, "Masculinities", available at: www.raewynconnell.net/p/masculinities_20.html.

10 There are certain parallels between the warrior ethos and the concept of hegemonic masculinity. For more, see R. W. Connell, above note 8.

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modern research into the sociology of war, the psychology of combatants, the influence of masculine and feminine gender norms, and hegemonic masculinity, we can outline this dialectic in order to contribute to a better understanding of the paradigm shift in today's wars.

We will start our exploration with the main cultural configuration that paved the way for men to enter the battlefield – i.e., the warrior ethos – as disseminated through the series of epic tales that, fundamentally, constitute history. We will then look at the instinctive psychological mechanisms that allow combatants not only to withstand the horrors of war but to participate in them, especially if combatants are bound up in the social expectations that define the warrior ethos and the system of masculine values consubstantial to it. Finally, we will attempt to assess the "crisis" in this heroic conception of war, which, although it has lasted for millennia, now seems to be fading in the modern world, giving way to the new post-heroic forms of violence such as civil wars and terrorism on the one hand, and military "strikes" by modern armed forces on the other. These new forms of violence appear to be "degraded" forms of war, which no longer pursue any social project, create any history, organize the memory of communities or produce any coherent, viable model of masculinity. Rather, they invariably seem destined to produce and reproduce feelings of humiliation and powerlessness that are devastating and both politically and socially sterile.

The warrior ethos: Inhibiting the instinct to flee and celebrating aggression

One is not born, but rather becomes, a fighter, a "violent man". We know that fear is a vital evolutionary asset: humans have a whole instinctive apparatus helping them to monitor their environment constantly. If danger arises, the stress caused by fear and anxiety triggers the flight instinct, which is unique in that it mobilizes all of our psychobiological resources in a crisis of behavioural hyperactivity, on which our survival depends. Aggression, on the other hand, is not natural. Discussing the matter of "fight or flight", Anthony Mawson – a specialist in the field of mass panic – concludes that an instinct to strike out, to engage in panic-related aggression, perhaps in the form of muscular hyperactivity directed at the source of the danger, only takes place if the subject cannot flee to safety.[11]

In any case, there is nothing instinctive about the danger and the aggressive response when it comes to war: both are primarily the result of a symbolic and social construct.[12] The reason why war is constantly present is that humans very quickly created a symbolic and cultural barrier capable of inhibiting our natural instinct to flee, in order to promote aggression within society. Moreover, the fateful invention of lethal weapons means that attacking other fighters, who are symbolically and culturally identified as "enemies", becomes a necessary condition of social integration of male warriors. War is a meaningful and organized social praxis

11 Anthony Mawson, *Mass Panic and Social Attachment: The Dynamics of Human Behavior*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2012.
12 *Ibid.*

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that promotes social integration. Fighting is a praxis that has largely been assigned to males from the outset, and it involves the cultural production of a specifically gendered set of values that has caused flight to be forbidden and has promoted risky and even life-threatening behaviour, giving war-like aggression the reward of social recognition, an identity-related reward that increases the self-esteem of those who wage war. That recognition is given to warriors by their peers in combat, and also by civilians – friends, family, and all non-combatant members of the community on which the warrior's self-esteem relies – who can only express their gratitude to those putting their lives at risk to protect and defend them.

If we believe the psychologists' attachment theory and the recognition theory of Axel Honneth, the need for recognition is fundamental to all inter-human relationships and conflicts.[13] We can therefore understand that, as long as the institution of war generates such an absolute social consensus around a set of masculine norms, the symbolic capital – i.e., the recognition and self-esteem – that warriors derive from war is such that it can only feed their motivation. It is this interaction between cultural norms and that most "human" intersubjective need which has, paradoxically, ensured the survival of that most "inhuman" practice – war. As a consequence, of course, if warriors refuse to fight and reject the principle of sacrifice, if they "give in to fear" (which would prompt the flight instinct), then they will be denied recognition and subjected to implacable scorn. They will be isolated, permanently excluded from the group to which they belong, and condemned, if not to death, then to shame, which is a form of psychological and social death that is more fearsome than physical death, especially for a "real" man whose narcissistic expectations demand nothing less than glory and honour in the eyes of his whole community.[14]

Glory and honour, courage and cowardice

In traditional societies, the codification of honour and glory, in all their incarnations, recycles fighters' psychological need for recognition and adapts it to the requirements of war, optimizing their behaviour for combat. Even off the battlefield, being recognized as a "real" man means obeying the order to die while bearing arms rather than accepting the slightest blemish to one's honour.

As a result, the warrior ethos, as one model for the masculine role, exploits the full spectrum of gendered values, from the most noble to the most ignoble, ranging between the two opposing extremes of courage and cowardice. The decriminalization of murder in the specific context of war allows courage, in a

13 Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996. Concerning the theory of attachment, the essential reference is the work of its founder, John Bowlby: see John Bowlby, Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment, Basic Books, New York, 1969; Attachment and Loss, Vol. 2: Separation: Anxiety & Anger, Hogarth Press, London, 1973; and Attachment and Loss, Vol. 3: Loss: Sadness & Depression, Hogarth Press, London, 1980.

14 There is no single idea of a "real" man. One may argue that the term refers to norms which change based on geography, culture and time. See Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson, *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1: *A–J*, ABC-CLIO, Oxford, 2004.

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fight to the death, to be celebrated as the ultimate masculine quality. Conversely, the criminalization of flight, as a symptom of cowardice, represents the ultimate masculine anti-value, denoting the infamy of "feminine" weakness and causing unbearable shame.

This ethos spans all warrior cultures – in other words, all cultures – although some nuances may occur. To some extent, this is required by the "system" of war, which paradoxically reveals the relational nature of war: it is hard to wage war without an enemy to fight, to prove one's courage without hand-to-hand combat against a worthy adversary. As a result, all men are brothers in potential enmity, and this is why war is defined by combat and not by simply eliminating the enemy. There is a sort of emotional dependence on or need for the enemy: in war, the need to kill is the corollary of the need to prove that one is not afraid of being killed, which is certainly not what underpins genocidal behaviour.

War and humiliation

The ultimate purpose of war, on the contrary, seems to be a transaction of pride and humiliation between an in-group and an out-group, with the two masculine coalitions going head-to-head in the fight to win prestige and pride through victory, and to avoid the humiliation of defeat. All thinkers who have considered the psychodynamics of humiliation have established a causal link between feelings of humiliation and the use of violence.[15] In general, the feeling of humiliation is regarded as a specific form of "narcissistic wound" because, unlike other types of related feelings that cause depressive responses (such as shame and guilt), it is more directly relational and social. It relates to the feeling of powerlessness that arises from being scorned and held in lower esteem by others, or at least what we imagine to be the case on the basis of our own self-image and our image of others. The extent to which war can promote this kind of dynamic is easily understood. Psychiatrist James Gilligan, one of the greatest theorists of the relationship between humiliation and violence, sees the feeling of humiliation as a universal cause of violence: "the purpose of violence is to diminish the intensity of shame and replace it as far as possible with its opposite, pride, thus preventing the individual from feeling overwhelmed by the feeling of shame".[16] Conversely, Axel Honneth views the fight for recognition as a universal driver of social conflicts, which invariably aim to restore a moral identity that has been injured and humiliated.[17] Humiliation is the antechamber of shame, a type of infamy that has become a stigma standing at odds with masculine gender norms and inevitably brings them to a state of stress and hysterical emotional insecurity depending on the circumstances. The system of cultural expectations and taboos related to the role of the masculine gender massively heightens the threat and the

15 See, for example, James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 2001.
16 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
17 A. Honneth, above note 13.

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fear of humiliation, a sentiment that, when exacerbated by war, can only be avoided in practice by the use of force, aggression and violence.

Although it is easy to imagine the humiliation of the defeated as a cause of war in many situations, it may seem less obvious that such feelings could explain the predatory warmongering of "conquerors" in the broad sense, from Alexander the Great, via Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan, to Hitler and Stalin. However, it is precisely the psycho-cultural interplay of honour and fear of shame that can reduce self-esteem in such a way that the subject becomes paranoid and especially vulnerable to humiliation. This results in a tendency towards an obsessive and pre-emptive quest for "glory" in order to prevent any threat of shame. We know the extent to which circumstances can favour the emergence of charismatic leaders who are "drunk on glory", who will always find a good reason to wage a predatory war. This seems to be the model of the imperialist war of conquest that has dominated the history of the last 3,000 years.[18]

In any event, the heroic narrative of the warrior ethos requires that the enemy be made to submit through violence, that victory in combat force the enemy into a shameful flight, that the enemy recognize his humiliation and shame, and thereby the superiority of the victor, and that the enemy's inferiority be recognized through his capitulation. War, because its invariable aim is that the victor's superiority be recognized by the defeated, is the most radical form of *institutional* humiliation, to borrow Bertrand Badie's phrase.[19] In war, the defeated inevitably suffer collective psychological and moral wounds, but those wounds remain encoded by cultural and social superstructures as a result of a violent transaction – that of combat – and therefore remain a humiliation that needs to be avenged and is potentially reversible. By encoding both the humiliation of the defeated and the glory of the victor, the warrior ethos shares this type of violent transaction between pride and shame with the negative reciprocity of vengeance, which forms the basis of the ancient principle of "an eye for an eye". The talionic law may be quite elementary, yet it has a regulatory power like any law, and it may be more powerful than generally thought, because combat requires a symmetry of means that characterizes war and which imposes codifiable forms of violence that depend on shared fundamental moral values, or at least understood values. Those values, in the end, allow us to determine who is the winner and who is the defeated, and to distinguish war from exterminations such as genocide, and perhaps even to prevent them.

18 This links again to the work of Axel Honneth, who does not view social conflicts in terms of biological or material interests *per se*, or in terms of self-preservation, but always in relation to the need for symbolic recognition, which is given form by the often excessive material wealth and privileges that powerful men, with their oversized need for recognition, strive to gain.

19 See, in particular, Bertrand Badie, *Le temps des humiliés*: *Pathologie des relations internationales*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2014, p. 13. Badie very simply defines the concept of institutional humiliation as the process by which a status inferior to the desired status of an individual, a group, or a State is authoritatively conferred by another individual, group or State, which therefore places the latter party in a position of superiority. War radicalizes this process in a paroxysmal way.

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The order of masculine recognition

To the extent that the fundamentals of the warrior ethos are shared by *all* men on both sides of a battle, the institution of war, like all institutions, operates as an order of mutual recognition that allows the two sides to coexist and regulates that coexistence.[20] War is *not* defined as a breakdown of connections, because there can be no doubt that communities at war have coexisted. However, it is a very particular form of coexistence because it is based on combat "between men". The act of recognition in war, applied to the masculine gender role as a whole, is what regulates the conflictual behaviour, and it is according to its values, rules and masculine standards that combatants have always been able to recognize each other and to assess, measure, respect and fear each other as enemies.

Julius Caesar was criticized for glorifying the Gauls' passion in combat in his writings, in order to glorify himself for propaganda purposes. That is an obvious criticism, but a false one, because by doing so Caesar merely followed the logic of reciprocal recognition which is the basis of the warrior ethos: in the highly narcissistic configuration of combat, the recognition of my strength depends on the recognition of my enemy's strength. Combat, at least in its traditional types, requires a system that should result in a symmetry of risk and proportionality in the means of aggression on the battlefield. Only the reciprocity of combat on equal terms allows the value, "glory", "honour" and masculine dignity of both sides to be measured. This is the source of today's *jus in bello*, the rules regulating the conduct of parties engaged in armed conflict. The ethical principles of combat have always defined the ethical scope of warfare, and did not deal with the desire to eliminate the enemy, which perverts war and turns the use of lethal force into a massacre. This explains the centrality of the *battlefield*, which is often highly debatable in purely practical terms, but is where all of the warrior's imaginative universe and social learning converge, where everything plays out, and where everything has played out time and time again over the centuries according to a highly uniform and universal model.

Heroic narrative and "psychotherapeutic" memory

It is probably by turning the exploits of their warriors, appointed as protectors of the group, into stories that human communities started to become aware of themselves as communities, and to create memories that initially aimed to strengthen their social cohesion, precisely with a view to future wars. This relied on a narrative that built a myth of power through a selective reading which repressed the traumatic reality of slaughter on the battlefield, a reality that Henry Dunant had the merit of reclaiming from the realms of the unspoken in his well-named *Memory of Solferino*.[21] To some extent, universal epic mythology was used to

20 For more details on the notion of "orders of recognition" as major structures that regulate social interaction, see Paul Ricœur, *The Just*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2003.

21 Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*, ICRC, Geneva, 1959 (first published 1862).

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exorcise the deep psychological wounds that the reality of war inflicted on survivors: it is a reading of reality that organizes the myth *around* the denial and repression of real suffering, and *against* the threat of feelings of powerlessness and shame.

We can posit a psychotherapeutic function as well as an ideological function for global and transcultural epic narratives. The greatest epic tales explore warrior behaviour, exposing its constantly arising dilemmas, crises, challenges and human issues. They provide food for thought, and for centuries have prompted discussions about war, a topic with which they are obsessed. Nevertheless, a wounded fighter, mutilated in combat, is never depicted as a "victim": that type of reality is left out, and remains unspoken in epic tale-telling. He will only be portrayed as a wounded "hero", or possibly as an unjustly defeated martyr.

What the modern era calls "history" has been quick to produce an "edifying" popular narrative capable of being disseminated in schoolbooks, conveyed mainly through dates of victories and defeats and punctuated by the great deeds of war leaders and other heroes. The social imagination, celebrating the heroic model, embraces the commemorative rituals dedicated to men fallen on the "field of honour", which exorcise the experience of loss through a type of cultural communion. They are a form of sacred recognition that the community owes to those who have given or have lost everything, a condition for maintaining self-esteem and the feeling of belonging among the survivors, and one which no State dare do without, at the risk of weakening social cohesion and consensus.

The way in which culture smoothes out and recycles suffering to promote a kind of consensual symbolic hero worship of hegemonic masculinity is shown by the fact that, in the tradition of epic tales, the figure of the hero remains untouchable, whether in victory or defeat. Whether the hero is triumphant or a martyr, he remains an example and a founder, representing his community's masculine ideal and reinvigorating the motivation to wage war in both the victor and the vanquished.

Buddy relations

While the social pressure exerted by a culture and by a heroic masculine ethos leads men into combat, even with enthusiasm, the shock of the real is likely to cause an immediate weakening of these "learned" certainties, and instinct takes over in the hostile and violent environment of war. Modern studies of the soldier's psyche come to the same finding: in the hell on earth that is the battlefield, men no longer fight "for the cause" or any other high ideal.[22] They fight and continue to fight to preserve the ties with their comrades, within an emotional closeness that

22 There has been a great deal of literature on this subject from the end of the Second World War to the present day: see, for example, S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 1947; Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, The Free Press, Glencoe, IL, 1960; Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Raymond A. Millen and Terrence M. Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2003.

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is the only source of psychological security they have left. Judith Helman, quoting the research of psychiatrists focusing on the trauma of war, wrote that "the situation of constant danger led soldiers to develop extreme emotional dependency upon their peer group and leaders. They observed that the strongest protection against psychological breakdown was the morale and leadership of the small fighting unit."[23] Today, all military experts seem to agree that immersing men in an environment of permanent danger generates bonds of extreme emotional dependency between soldiers, and between soldiers and their leaders. And any soldier knows that, to maintain that vital emotional bond, he needs to fight and not "lose face" among his peers. In other words, more than ever, the recognition that a fighter obtains from his peers through these "buddy relations" gives him an emotional foundation, a sort of pride and sense of his own dignity that is exceptional and of a strength that is unmatched in any other circumstance. That connection, vastly more powerful than any type of "ordinary" social relationship, is formed both horizontally and vertically in the traditional military structure. If unconditional obedience to the leader's orders merely results from coercion or disciplinary training, it remains fragile. In combat, however, dependency on the leader, a figure of ultimate protection in the chaos, is so total, and loyalty to him so vital, that if the leader shows his men that he is "one of them", if he takes risks and keeps a cool head, then his role as leader is invested with an emotional bond that is as natural and unconditional as that between a parent and child. Finally, the attachment of the fighter to his "combat buddies" naturally forms part of a wider spectrum of intense emotional connections, which are vital to his psychological stability: buddy relations on the front line, but also connections with the "rear", with the "home front", whereby a son writes to a father and mother, a friend writes to a friend, a lover to a lover. These connections, by maintaining the link between the soldier's subjective experience and his "attachment figures", protect the foundations of inner security on which his motivation and psychological balance depend.

The bond between this specifically masculine fraternity of fighters is invariably regarded as "sacred" by the fighters themselves, who are the ones best placed to know what they owe to that bond and what they owe to each other in psychological terms. That bond, which has been central to epic tales since the Battle of Thermopylae, has always contributed to the heroic war being lauded as revealing man's most noble qualities. However, at the risk of demystifying the legend, facts must be faced: it is the circumstances of war and these emotional ties that in most cases have determined the "heroism" of all those men who had no alternative but to throw themselves "heroically" into death, because losing face was not an option for them.

The brutalization of masculine identity

The repression, denial, conditioning and social learning that shore up all psychological defence mechanisms against painful emotions cause fighters to

23 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books, Philadelphia, PA, 1992, p. 25.

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close down their emotions altogether. The adaptive response to the trauma of violence is the repression and draining of sensitivity, emotion and empathy.[24] In other words, fighters reduce their exposure in order to become less vulnerable to pain. The descent into gratuitous cruelty is not a recent development, and remains an inseparable part of the history of war. Violence breeds violence, and long-term exposure to violence, brutality, danger and suffering in the homosocial environment of armed forces and masculine fighting forces leads to a serious loss of empathy and the denial of the need for other people. This is a fatal defence mechanism, because it facilitates the process by which stress and the most severe inner wounds are relieved through violent aggression.

It is well known that in order to achieve a cool head in combat, all military training includes a kind of preventative brutalization. From Sparta's hoplites to today's marines, that training has always subjected men to intensive humiliation in order to teach them how to resist those kinds of feelings, to restrict their moral horizon to simply obeying the orders of the hierarchy, and to thereby repress their emotions until they are no longer capable of showing the slightest "weakness". This takes place in barracks that make individuals captive to a homosocial environment in which they are required to mimic the codes of masculinity that surround them, with various levels of brutality, in their actions and words.

The spectrum of humiliation ranges from the most benign – the ridicule we feel when other people look at us in a certain way, for example – to the most intolerable inner pain. On the battlefield, humiliation is built into the environment; everything around the fighter conspires to test his ability to maintain his self-esteem and meet the expectations of his peers and leaders, among whom he cannot countenance losing face.

Intense fear of an omnipresent danger, the loss of control, uncontrollable stress, the inability to protect one's comrades, the whirlwind of stimuli that prevent any type of rational thought, the moral shock of the inevitable atrocities that a fighter will commit, the impression that one's own action, personal initiative or anything else no longer makes sense or has any impact on reality – beyond a certain threshold, all of these experiences combine to overwhelm the individual and drag him down into powerlessness, incapable of living up to "learned" expectations. Those extreme conditions are the fate of fighters in civil wars, where there is no longer any battlefield, where all the rules of heroic war collapse into unpredictability and the ubiquity of deadly threat and unlimited violence. Those are the conditions witnessed by the fighters who took part in the People on War study.[25] In those circumstances, the disintegration of subjectivity may cause groups and individuals to adopt hyperactive and compulsive behaviours amounting to a "killing frenzy", based on the instinctive causal effect

24 Regarding the traumatic origin of violence and the way it is passed down through the generations through social learning in disciplinary and authoritarian patriarchal societies, see the interesting study by Felicity de Zulueta, *From Pain to Violence: The Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 2006.

25 ICRC, above note 3.

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between unbearable humiliation and violence, as described by James Gilligan and mentioned above.[26]

Military discipline and strategic interests have always sought to restrict such "misconduct". However, it only intensifies further when the very expectations of the hierarchy and of the dominant social discourse veer towards the ignoble. That is what happens in war environments that tend towards genocide, ethnic cleansing and collective violence with the intention to exterminate. In such circumstances, "buddy relations" have the unfortunate perverse effect of supporting and promoting the moral regression. The primary connection that boosts the morale of each fighter and enforces the taboo of flight is mostly emotional and instinctive. It is therefore divorced from any moral rationality, and "buddy relations" become the most effective way of brutalizing fighters in the event of a massacre or organized extermination, because of the behavioural mimicry described above. In a context where the fighter is extremely isolated, possessed and therefore made insane by the pressure of a totally corrupt environment, it is likely that he would be prepared to accept any moral compromise in order not to "lose face" and to avoid being cast out of the group, through the unconscious fear of abandonment.[27]

In the end, it is in the furnace of war and the toxic masculinity of the barracks that the myth of the "violent man's" nature probably emerged and has been reproduced and disseminated. The personality of that man, with its macho authoritarianism and impulsive temerity – finicky and vigilant regarding anything that could compromise his "honour", arrogant, easily angered and hardened to any form of "effeminate" sentimentalism – asserts itself as "tough but fair" in the best-case scenario, in a world where men are the standard-setters, where a "man's word" is law.

The trap of the heroic regime

It is through the combination of excessive privileges and recognition that men have constantly benefited from their "exploits" in war. From the ban on flight, which forms the foundation for social expectations regarding the courage of warriors, and from the related shame of cowardice, men have been trapped by a myth that forbids them from recognizing that they can have their own emotions, and this has condemned thousands of young men to burn in the fires of the hell on earth that is war. The model has been reproduced to some extent from generation to generation, and neither the worst moral lapses, nor the worst suffering or humiliation, nor the worst destruction, has been able to damage that model. On

26 J. Gilligan, above note 15, p. 29.

27 As regards this type of collective descent into hell, it is impossible not to refer to Christopher Browning's essential work, *Ordinary Men: Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper Collins, New York, 1992. However, the extraordinary accounts of Hutu killers, reported in Rwanda by Jean Hatzfeld, are possibly even more illuminating. See Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, Picador, New York, 2006; and *The Antelope's Strategy: Living in Rwanda after the Genocide*, Picador, New York, 2010.

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the contrary, those evils have merely strengthened the momentum of war. However, since the dawning of modernity in late nineteenth century, a new cultural ideology of masculinity has gradually emerged, which obtains self-fulfilment in ways other than the use of force.[28]

It is reasonable to ask whether the logic of war – which, even as it unleashes hegemonic masculinity, confines it in a psychological and social system of reciprocal and symbolic exchanges and transactions that regulate it and set its limits – has not restricted the extension of "extermination" behaviour aimed at eliminating the enemy, a behaviour which is *not* in the nature of war. Such behaviour is invariably caused by highly corrupting situations, such as the collapse or breakdown of community structures, likely to cause extreme emotional insecurity and, therefore, extreme brutalization of masculine subjectivity. This is precisely the breeding ground for the post-heroic crisis of hegemonic masculinity that has existed since the 1990s.

The post-heroic crisis

In *The Iliad*, Homer – the father of the Western heroic narrative – explores from the outset the risk of *hubris*, the excessive destruction that war can engender: in war, men are constrained to use force, but the confrontation contains the seeds of excessiveness. The West has not paid much attention to Homer in this respect, and the massacres of colonial wars, World Wars and the proxy conflicts of the Cold War have been hubristic flare-ups that may have sounded like a death knell for the conventional, long-standing warrior ethos. In the last four centuries, following the West's colonial–imperial model, the world has been engaged in a mad rush to achieve the greatest asymmetry possible, increasingly giving in to extermination tendencies and maximizing the means of destruction without restraint, until nuclear weapons stopped that surge in its tracks by establishing the definitive model of impotent power.

The good news is that conventional war between States has been dying out, and if this trend continues in the next few decades, it will probably save the lives of millions of young men who would have been condemned to death by States continuing conventional wars "as a continuation of politics by other means".[29]

The bad news is that in many post-colonial and post-imperial contexts – where these slaughters have drained the available supply of masculine pride, where men have had to repress colossal humiliation, and where whole societies have been stripped of their culture and deprived of their past, their sense of history and their identity – it was inevitable that what had been repressed would

28 See Robert Muchembled, *A History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011; Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 2nd ed., Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2000.

29 See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, David Campbell Publishers, London, 1993.

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resurface again.[30] That is what has happened, and when the logic of West-versus-East collapsed, an epidemic of civil wars caused resentment to explode and opened up the psychological and social scars borne by various heirs to oppression or "deculturation", which are synonyms for "modernity" for large numbers of people in what once used to be called the "Third World". In these civil wars, unbearable narcissistic wounds that had had no chance to heal have been reopened, and it was inevitable that violence would be used to relieve the collective humiliation arising from various types of failed existence.

These civil wars share common elements that can only increase the humiliation and demoralization felt by the fighters: no *casus belli*, but the collapse of social trust that disrupts relationships with neighbours. Where there are no longer any "battles" worthy of the name, where the symmetry of risk and the territorial nature of the battle disintegrate, the whole social space is transformed into a "dead zone". In every conventional war there is an effort to limit that dead zone to a "front line" where armed men are supposed to protect the rear, civilians and vital resources, or in other words, territory that is "off the battlefield" and in which the emotional security of the whole group – starting with the fighters themselves – is rooted.

In the contexts of "deculturation" of war, such as those experienced by most people taking part in the People on War survey, negative passions blind the whole group and are made even more acute by anxiety. That anxiety stems from the unpredictable and the incomprehensible, from the previously unthinkable and senseless killing between "neighbours". It is the anxiety of fighters who realize that they can no longer protect those close to them from a type of violence which no longer has any meaning; anxiety related to a lack of organization, equipment, training and structured leadership; anxiety arising from the blurring between fighters and civilians that makes the whole environment a mortal threat. All of these factors are humiliating for fighters, making them even more susceptible to panic and to the processes of brutalization that cause extermination behaviour and atrocities to flourish. In this ecosystem of fear and hatred, the trade-off between pride and humiliation for which so many men have "courageously" prepared themselves slips into a continuum of passion-driven and perverse violence. Feelings of unbearable humiliation are then relieved especially fiercely through deliberately humiliating forms of aggression, in a spiral of violence that seems impossible to contain: mutilation, rape, torture and massacres form a spectrum of violence that not only lies outside any form of recognition or pride but actively aims to send a message of scorn and of denial of the out-group. It is

30 For example, the contexts of Afghanistan, Angola, Congo, the former Yugoslavia, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen could be mentioned. We could add, while emphasizing the obvious difference in scale, the Rwanda genocide, the causes of which feature dynamics similar to those of civil wars in the post-Cold War era. This tendency is paradigmatic in the author's view, although it should be noted that in certain infra-State conflict situations, "heroic" motivations, the sense of one's own history and purpose, clearly still exist. In the Kurdish fight for self-determination or in the Israel–Palestine conflict, to take just two examples, the motivation and bravery of many fighters is based, albeit to varying extents, on a consistent, consensual heroic narrative.

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a situation in which there is no longer any trace of a "victor" after the killing, only the devastated subjectivity of the perpetrators.

Finally, as the ultimate manifestation of the dissolution of the heroic warrior ethos, terrorism and the so-called "war on terror" seem to be the culmination of a slow post-heroic reconfiguration of masculine collective violence. There is no doubt that terrorists are no longer seeking "victory": it is as if they have learned the "lesson" of the above-mentioned civil wars. It is likely that members of terrorist groups are convinced that they have a "just cause",[31] but if an acceptable doctrine requires a rational relationship between the ends and the means used to achieve them, the relationship that terrorist aggression establishes between ends and means is impossible to defend in terms of the warrior ethos. The means – i.e., terrorist operations – are simply designed to humiliate everyone by creating fear, forcing flight and imposing behaviour that would be "shameful" in a war, with no possible alternative. As has happened so often in the past in war operations that have "got out of hand", this violence no longer constitutes a war. What remains the exception in war becomes the rule in terrorism, which targets defenceless civilians instead of adversaries. The unexpected massacre of unarmed innocent people is the opposite of the symmetry of risk involved in "fighting your way to victory", and its sole aim is to sow terror and panic. Civilians are targeted as representatives of a way of life that symbolizes today's disqualification of traditional patriarchal values. The adherence to patriarchal values is a social model that has to some extent become obsolete and is steadily being forgotten by new generations.

The author believes that terrorism can be interpreted as a highly radicalized way of relieving specifically masculine feelings of powerlessness, felt by men who are humiliated and deeply wounded by the lack of recognition from a society which they feel has doomed their lives to failure.[32] Hans Magnus Enzensberger painted an incisive picture of "the radical loser": a young man who is denied access to modernity by his circumstances, who has lost everything, but who is the product of the system that excludes him, and who falls back by default on the toxic norms affiliated with certain types of masculinities, which have always been encoded in such a way as to enable him to recover some self-esteem. Furious action, including suicide bombing, can then be interpreted as a defence mechanism against despair and a lack of meaning:[33] a suicide attack borrows the masculine sacrificial values of the warrior's courage but radically perverts them, since there is no longer any symmetrical combat, since the individual that perpetuates such values is already psychologically dead, and since he is not representing or

31 This is the counterintuitive view of Scott Atran, who believes that the West is making a major strategic mistake by closing its eyes to the genuine appeal of the Islamic State. Scott Atran, "ISIS Is a Revolution", *Aeon*, available at: https://aeon.co/essays/why-isis-has-the-potential-to-be-a-world-altering-revolution.

32 See Jeff Hearn, "From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men", *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004.

33 See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Le perdant radical*, Gallimard, Paris, 2006; Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "The Terrorist Mindset: The Radical Loser", *Spiegel Online*, 20 December 2006, available at: www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/the-terrorist-mindset-the-radical-loser-a-451379.html.

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protecting anyone through his act, other than in fantasy. In the case of the jihadi, that fantasy takes the form of an "umma", a community of Muslims around the world, which obviously does not exist in reality[34] – but after all, far-right extremists also invoke supremacist community links that are just as fictitious. The radical nature of the loser's violence here depends on the absolute "narcissistic isolation" of a subject cut off from any social connection,[35] which causes him to hate both himself and the other. His feelings of humiliation can apparently only be relieved by killing himself while killing the other.

The impact of "Islamic terrorism" on the global stage is such that we forget that it is based on a fatal misunderstanding: we are seeing an Islamization of radicality, much more so than a radicalization of Islam.[36] The psychological mechanisms that lead jihadis, lone wolves carrying out school massacres and far-right activists like Timothy McVeigh and Anders Breivik to take action are undeniably similar. On the whole, there are very few practicing Muslims among the many young Western men who, suffering and lacking any bearing, are drawn to Islamic State's jihad because it offers them an "identity kit", giving them the impression of restoring meaning to their lives through violence.[37]

Finally, "the asymmetry of the weakest" strategy adopted by terrorists is particularly humiliating for Western societies suddenly stripped of their omnipotence precisely because it makes terrorists unpredictable and elusive, and because it helps them to inflict on the armed forces of modern, peaceful societies one of the worst humiliations.[38] Yet such a type of asymmetry is precisely what characterizes the civil wars discussed above, where the fighters are unable to defend and protect members of their own community against the violence of "enemies" who it is their supreme mission to fight and defeat. There is a tragic irony to this reciprocal powerlessness shown by such post-heroic enemies – conventional armed forces and terrorists on the ground. After some bitter failures and the stalemate reached in many attempts at military intervention based on a heroic-messianic model, modern States no longer want young men to die "on the front line"; instead, they try to combat elusive terrorist threats with smart

34 While Olivier Roy, an expert in Islam, is right to state that the "umma" does not exist other than in a Western fantasy, the People on War accounts relating to Afghanistan emphasized the extent to which a form of "ideal umma" remains a reference in the minds of many Muslims exposed to violence and the dissolution of their specific culture, who find in it a consoling hope of a "superior" identity. See G. Holleufer and P. Cotter, above note 6, p. 25 ff.

35 In the conclusion to his essay, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger emphasizes unambiguously the systemic nature of the "radical loser" phenomenon, which is a product of our modern times: "Attacks [by radical losers] represent a permanent background risk, like ordinary everyday deaths by accident on the streets, to which we have become accustomed. In a global society that constantly produces new losers, this is something we will have to live with." H. M. Enzensberger, *Le perdant radical*, above note 33, p. 57. Our modern times constantly exclude certain individuals, whose violence can therefore not be reduced to any disease of individual subjectivity.

36 See, in particular, Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, Hurst Publishers, London, 2017.

37 S. Atran, above note 31.

38 The author chooses to focus on Western societies as an example because he believes they could feel particular frustration since the West tends to consider itself as being in charge of global security issues.

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weapons systems.[39] The war between drones and presumed terrorists, lying in ambush and often sheltered by the human shield of the surrounding population, takes on a novel and unusual form of symmetry: modern States are using human-free weapons systems against men who are already dead and have been transformed into bombs. Obviously, although the two sides' motivations are diametrically opposed, at root terrorism and drone warfare share a common *modus operandi*: on both sides it becomes reduced to an erratic and potentially endless series of "strikes" that aim to achieve not "victory" but the elimination of the other without resorting to "combat".[40] There is nothing here that can engender any real masculine pride, nothing that could resurrect a relationship of recognition between enemies, even between the victors and the vanquished. Dialogue with terrorism is impossible, since its real language consists of extreme and arbitrary violence, a language of terror addressed directly to its enemies' media, which pass it on and broadcast it extensively, in a way that merely perpetuates the violence that they condemn.

Conclusion

To summarize, we can posit that, during the 1990s, the global process by which hegemonic masculinity was reconfigured became significantly more intense, and it is hard to retrace its history here. A regime of violence, which the author refers to as "post-heroic", became widespread, cut off from its roots and taken out of the battlefield. The drama of aggression no longer consists of promoting a transaction between pride and humiliation in face-to-face combat "between men"; rather, it involves creating essentially extermination-based operational procedures from which no-one can derive any pride. Those procedures have become locked in an endless cycle of violence, mistrust and social scorn, and as well as constantly propagating terrorism, their most recent incarnations are the flood of violence being inflicted on the Muslims in Myanmar and the endemic forms of violence arising from the civil wars currently taking place in Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan.

Today, instead of helping to underpin the community and strengthen ties of belonging, instead of restricting aggression with the socially integrating values of combat and of the warrior ethos, collective hegemonic masculinity is sinking into a tendency to deny and exterminate the other. This only increases feelings of humiliation on all sides, harmful feelings that render impossible any type of

39 The useful work done by Edward Luttwak on "post-heroic warfare" should be mentioned. Luttwak analyzes in detail the Western tendency to avoid loss of life and its consequences in conducting war in his essay "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare", *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 1995. However, the present author uses the term "post-heroic" in its more widely accepted meaning, which aims to include the experiences of fighters in conventional armed forces and in the full range of irregular armed formations seen today, within the same overarching psycho-social reality.

40 Regarding the ethical issues arising from drone warfare, see the outstanding book by Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, Penguin, London, 2015.

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reciprocal recognition (emotional, legal or cultural) – which, according to Axel Honneth's typology, is a requirement for social relationships and coexistence, even in cases of conflict.[41]

It is unclear where this movement will lead. Although today's gendered violence reveals to the observer the mythical, self-fulfilling and illusory foundations that have allowed war to perpetuate itself, it shies away from any attempt to give any "noble" meaning to armed aggression.

If we explore this shift in humanitarian terms, we reach two conclusions. The first is that most fighters in the world today must be regarded as *active victims* of a kind of violence that, in the post-heroic configurations arising from the ongoing disappearance of the warrior ethos, can simply no longer be regarded as a plausible continuation of politics "by other means", or even as a source of any legitimate type of masculine pride. The new uncharted territories – including the ghettos of the modern city and danger zones such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan and Yemen, which seem forgotten and in which millions of demoralized young men are trapped – will always be fertile ground for recruiting and replacing the perpetrators of post-heroic violence. This should be enough to prompt discussion about the resources that should be used to engage with these men, who are demoralized and disconnected from the world – to restore a link with a reality that is not deadly and that can offer alternatives to violence where such alternatives no longer seem to exist. Henry Dunant lifted men physically wounded in combat from the realms of the unspoken, making them the focus of relief efforts. It could be argued that his legacy should include targeting men who are psychologically and socially wounded in a universe of violence no longer founded on combat, but on a systemic syndrome whereby men brutally relieve feelings of failure, powerlessness and humiliation.

The second conclusion is that, in a global context in which the rules on the conduct of hostilities are increasingly struggling to have an impact, regardless of how they are adjusted, it may initially seem that the priority is to remind parties of their legal obligations. However, that would be to ignore the fact that the problem does not involve violations of recognized laws, but a gradual shift in the very paradigms that used to form the basis of war.[42] If that shift is moving the warrior ethos towards a post-heroic state, as we have discussed above, we must move away from a prescriptive approach, because it is pointless to disseminate rules when they have become incomprehensible because the frame of reference that validates them – i.e., war according to the traditional warrior ethos – is disappearing, like the whole ancient world that is fading before our eyes.

As a result, the answer is not to remind people of the rules, but to remind violent men of their identity. In other words, to prevent humanitarian law sinking

41 A. Honneth, above note 13.

42 For example, there are numerous fighters who have no knowledge of international humanitarian law. One may argue that their original culture should have taught them some traditional rules as warriors, but this may not be the case today given the above-mentioned global deculturation of war, which places it further from the traditional "paradigms" of war.

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into a kind of self-commemorative state, we must restore a psychological and social connection between the law and men, by directly addressing the need for recognition that we all share. This is not a kind of naive evangelism, a pious wish, marketing or collective psychoanalysis, but the desire to restore a dialogue with men who are suffering precisely because they are excluded from the modern world. The final goal would be to explore the issues through dialogue with those most affected, with an open mind, instead of giving ready-made responses. This may prove impossible. However, one of the ICRC's unique characteristics has always been its constant willingness to "talk with the devil", to meet all participants in war without prejudice and regardless of the circumstances. When carrying out the People on War survey, which involved a high level of interaction with all kinds of fighters for several months, there were often doubts as to whether it was even possible to meet and talk with certain particularly violent armed groups. By way of conclusion, let us describe one of those apparently impossible meetings. In 1999, in South Africa, a project team managed to meet a group of former militia, undoubtedly "dangerous" men, armed to the teeth and with a price on their head. Not only did they agree to meet but, gradually, they opened up about their own violence, which they discussed with authenticity. At the end of the discussion, the group's imposing commander stood up with a sombre air, causing those present to fear the worst. On the contrary, however, he approached the head of the team and said, "You know, the world considers us as wild animals, and my hands are stained with blood, but this discussion gave me back part of my dignity."[43] Can there be any clearer exposition of the post-heroic masculine condition? Also, since discussion seems to give men back their identity and boost their self-esteem through the simple recognition provided by a real interaction, might not this contain the seed of some practical way forward? Might not this offer the highly pragmatic prospect of meeting and restoring connections with people in places where that is least expected?

43 This story is a personal memory of the author.

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