

Are We Born Warriors?

The Psychosocial Preconditions of Peacefulness and Destructiveness

by Andreas Peglau¹

What follows is an edited version of a lecture, held on June 30, 2023, for the lecture series “Psychological Anthropology: Militarism and War” at the University of Cologne. The following English text is based on a translation done by DeepL Translate, as corrected and revised by Stephen A. Cooper. For the original German, see: <https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/sind-wir-geborene-krieger-zu-psychosozialen-voraussetzungen-von-friedfertigkeit-und-destruktivitaet/>

What is war?

An organized, violent conflict between countries or larger groups of people carried out with weapons. Waging war, in any case, means being prepared to kill other people. If we were ‘born warriors,’ the readiness to hurt and destroy other people without conscience would belong to our basic psychic equipment. We would come into the world with it. This would therefore also have to show itself somehow throughout life – moreover, in principle already always and everywhere since human beings have existed.

Commensurate statements can be found aplenty.

The proposition “*War is the father of all*” has been handed down from the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus (approx. 520 BCE – 460 BCE).² In 1642, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote of the “*war of all against all*” as the original, *natural state*.³ Almost three hundred years later Sigmund Freud picked up another saying, quoted by Hobbes from the Roman playwright Plautus, and maintained that “*Man is a wolf to man*,” a “*savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien*,” based on a “primary” – that is, a given – “*mutual hostility of human beings*.”⁴

¹ Since I borrow here from various fields of science for which I have no special qualification, and I mainly use secondary sources, I recommend you formulate your own impressions with the help of the books highlighted in the text.

² Heraclitus, *frag.* 215: “War is the father of all and king of all, and some he shows as gods, others as men; some he makes slaves, others free” (trans., G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957]), 195.

³ Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive: The Latin Version*, ed. Harold Warrender (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1983), 81: “I first show that the condition of human beings outside civil society – a condition one may call the state of nature – is none other than a war of all against all, and that in this war all people have the right to all things” (trans. Stephen A. Cooper).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961 [orig. 1930]), 111–112. Freud does not attribute the saying from Plautus, *Asin.* 2.4.88 to Hobbes, who had cited it in the dedicatory opening of *De Cive* (p. 73). On the fact that the saying defames wolves, see:

Were this so, we wouldn't have to mull over how wars come about or whose interests are transacted in wars: it is just in our genes somehow This would also mean that wars could hardly be avoided in the long run. And if they could be avoided at all, then that would be only at the cost of suppressing our true nature, our 'natural disposition.'

"Ever since humans have existed"?

Here is just one example of the fact that the 'war as the primordial condition' thesis is still constantly presented. Founded by trend researcher, Matthias Horx, the "Future Institute" describes itself as *"a reputable partner for individuals and organisations who want to understand and shape the future"* and claims to impact *"public thinking on future matters ... in questions concerning economic and social developments."*⁵

The Institute's website informs us:

*"Ever since humans have existed, there have been warlike conflict. ... The most violent societies are – or were – the very ones that for us are instead assigned the attribute 'peaceful'. Hunter-gatherer societies had the highest murder rates, and in most regions of the earth tribal wars raged without end. In the natural primitive state, you took for yourself what you could get; members of another tribe did not count as 'our own people,' and inhibitions against killing had hardly developed, especially in the many situations of scarcity."*⁶

Origins

So let's take a look at the history of humankind. About six million years ago, the development that led to Homo sapiens is said to have begun. Various factors contributed to this process, including the use of fire. We learn about this on the *Planet Wissen* ("Planet Science") website:⁷

"Some findings indicate that our ancestors ... already used the power of fire about 1.5 million years ago. But the question of when humans succeeded in starting fires on their own is still hotly debated, even among researchers. Many assume that this was possible for Neanderthal man with the help of flints 40,000 years ago."

<https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/der-mensch-ist-dem-menschen-kein-wolf-ueber-eine-eklatante-freudsche-fehleistung/>

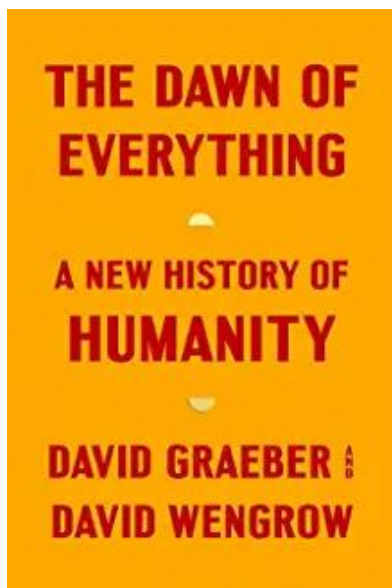
⁵ <https://www.zukunftsinstitut.de/about-us/>

⁶ <https://www.zukunftsinstitut.de/artikel/warum-gibt-es-noch-immer-kriege/> For the claims and data manipulation of Steven Pinker, presented as a warrant for these statements, see Rutger Bregman: *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, trans. from the Dutch by Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), 78–91. See also Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 183–186.

⁷ <https://www.planet-wissen.de/natur/energie/feuer/index.html>

If the figures given here are correct, our ancestors would have been handling fire for just under a million and a half years without figuring out how to make it themselves. It is not surprising that other scholars, such as the historian James C. Scott, assign a much earlier date for it: about 400,000 years ago.⁸

400,000 or 40,000 years? Behind this remarkable vagueness of 360,000 years is concealed a basic problem of the investigation of our earliest stages of development. In fact, we are making a lot of assumptions about 99% percent of the real existence of the living beings who were becoming more and more human – but we *know practically nothing*.



In the 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow summarize the current state of research:

“For most of this period, evidence is extremely limited. There are phases of literally thousands of years for which the only evidence of hominin activity we possess is a single tooth, and perhaps a handful of pieces of shaped flint. (...) What were these ancestral societies like? At this point, at least, we should be honest and admit that, for the most part, we don’t have the slightest idea.... Most of the time we don’t even really know what was going on below the neck, let alone with pigmentation, diet or anything else.”⁹

Even the time when ‘modern man’, *Homo sapiens*, appeared cannot be exactly determined. Mostly it is assumed this may have been about 200,000 years ago. Thus Graeber and Wengrow: *“the first direct evidence of what we’d now call complex symbolic human behaviour, or simply ‘culture’ ... dates back no more than 100,000 years.”* And it is only since about 45,000 years ago that such evidence has gradually become more common.¹⁰

At this point, however, *Homo sapiens* had already been around for about 150,000 years. But even what we think we know about the psychic constitution, motives, goals, and social behaviors of human beings in those 150,000 years rests almost exclusively on more or less plausible *assumptions*.

⁸ James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 3. Compare Hannes Stubbe, *Weltgeschichte der Psychologie* (Lengerich/Westfalen: Pabst, 2021), 27.

⁹ David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

The limits of what can be explored

A report from June 6, 2023 that already 200,000 years ago hominids – human-like ancestors – supposedly buried their relatives revealed once more how provisional these assumptions often are. Prior to that, this had been conceded only as regards Neandertals and Homo sapiens – moreover, only since 100,000 years ago. These findings, the report says, “call into question the previous understanding of human evolution, according to which only the development of larger brains made possible complex activities such as burying the dead.”¹¹



A compact compilation of early archaeological findings and the assumptions derived from them can be found in the book *Weltgeschichte der Psychologie* (*World History of Psychology*), written by psychologist and anthropologist Hannes Stubbe.¹²

Let us make a full stop at this point. The quoted sentence of the Future Institute “*Ever since humans have existed, there have been warlike conflicts,*” is in no way provable and is therefore unserious and unscientific.

As we shall see, the situation is no better for the other assertions made in that quotation.

Indeed, the lack of objective evidence likewise means that we cannot prove a consistently *peaceful* early phase of mankind, a paradisaal, primitive-communist or matriarchal state from the earliest human times.

In 1996, the archaeologists Brigitte Röder, Juliane Hummel, and Brigitta Kunz concluded after thorough research that matriarchy “*can neither be proven nor disproven with archaeological sources. One of the greatest problems of archaeology is that up until today it has no key in hand to the thought world of past societies.*”¹³

Such a “key” basically developed only through the possibility of recording written languages in a lasting manner, e.g., in the form of cuneiform writing – that is, only a little more than 5000 years ago.¹⁴

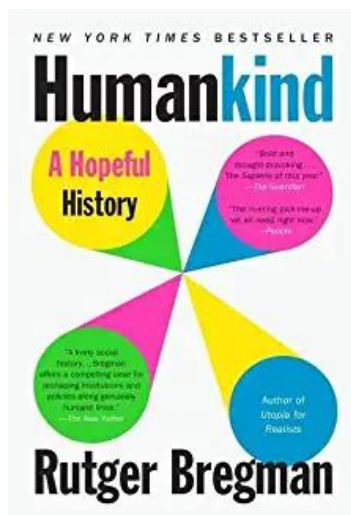
The fact that even this key is not precisely shaped – that written traditions are often wrong, distorted, and almost always incomplete – is already pointed out by the very justified sentence that history is always written by the *victors*.

¹¹ <https://science.orf.at/stories/3219658/>

¹² See Stubbe (as fn. 8), 15-67.

¹³ Brigitte Röder, Juliane Hummel, and Brigitta Kunz, *Göttinnendämmerung: Das Matriarchat aus archäologischer Sicht* (Krummwisch: Königsfurt, 2001), 396. See also Graeber and Wengrow, (as fn. 9), 238-244.

¹⁴ Scott (as fn. 8), 4.



In the famous case of Easter Island, it was the conquerors and slave traders who wreaked destruction on the natives, a destruction that they themselves had caused and initiated among them.¹⁵ This is only *one* example of the mendacity of the standard narrative of the ‘evil savage’, whom only a ‘good’ (Western) civilization was tasked with making socially acceptable.

The historian Rutger Bregman has collected such examples and critically examined various allegedly scientific experiments, studies, and publications about the conception of humanity. He concludes that human nature is “basically good.”

Answerable questions

Based on deficient data about human (pre-) history, are we able to answer the question of whether we are born warriors?

Yes indeed we can.

Let’s think about it: an innate readiness for war and killing would have to show itself always and everywhere, if only by the fact that it has to be continually suppressed. In order to reject the statement that we are born warriors as unreliable, we need therefore to prove only that history went – or could go – differently.

First of all, I’ll take up two arguments from archaeological research. The anthropologist Brian Ferguson has examined hundreds of Homo sapiens skeletons that were older than 10,000 years, in various places of discovery, to determine whether they show damage by the impact of force. The result: this was the case in one out of a dozen of them. Ferguson states that there is no archaeological evidence of frequent warfare during this period.¹⁶

Secondly, thousands of prehistoric cave paintings have now been discovered. None of them depicts war scenes.¹⁷

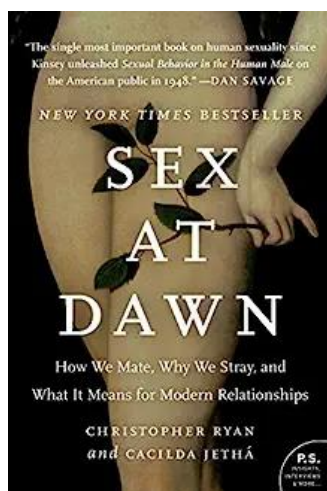
But one could reply to this that the skeletons disfigured by the effects of war, and that the pictorial representations of war may have disappeared over time or may not yet have been discovered.

What is the situation *within* the last 10,000 years, the period in which the first cities and states were founded and for which there is far more archaeological, and later also written, evidence?

¹⁵ Bregman (as fn. 6), 115–134.

¹⁶ Cited in Ryan and Jethá (as fn. 6), 193.

¹⁷ Bregman (as fn. 6), 91.

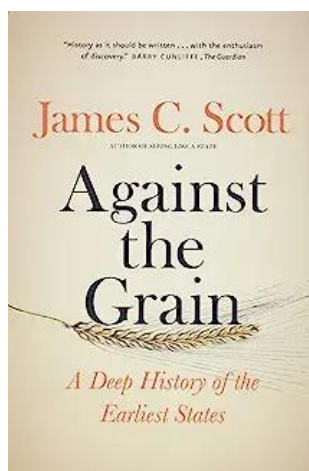


First: the nomadic hunter-gatherers, who adapted their habitat to the cycle of the seasons and the climate, apparently lived far healthier, longer, more comfortably and more peacefully¹⁸ than the 'Future Institute' and Thomas Hobbes wanted to admit.

Their life expectancy, psychologist Christopher Ryan and psychiatrist Cacilda Jethá reflect, may have been 70 to 90 years.¹⁹ In their book *Sex at Dawn*,²⁰ they cite anthropologist Robert Edgerton as confirming that in Europe urban populations probably "*did not match the longevity of hunter-gatherers until the mid-nineteenth or even twentieth century.*"²¹

Probably related to the healthy lifestyle of our distant ancestors is they also seem to have been taller "than the average person today."²²

Why on a fertile planet with inexhaustible resources — Ryan and Jethá speak of the "original affluent society"²³ — on a planet, which, moreover, was essentially uninhabited,²⁴ should people have gone on strenuous migrations in order to kill other people somewhere or to be killed themselves?



Moreover, hunter-gatherer societies existed not only *before* but for thousands of years *together with* developing states. In these newly founded states, life expectancy and quality of life did not increase at first, but rather *decreased* — among other things, because the close co-existence of people with each other and with domestic animals caused epidemics, and because people were now forced to obtain everything necessary for life primarily in one and the same place.²⁵

James C. Scott's book *Against the Grain* proves that the founding of states by no means represented an inclusive social progress, and that the supposedly 'primitive' hunter-gatherer way of life deserves closer examination.²⁶

¹⁸ Ryan and Jethá (as fn. 6), 182–199.

¹⁹ Ibid, 202.

²⁰ Despite the lurid title, this is a serious book about our history, sexuality, and partnership.

²¹ Cited in Ryan and Jethá (as fn. 6), 207.

²² Ibid, 201.

²³ Ibid, 176. Ryan and Jethá refer to Marshall Sahlins's essay "The Original Affluent Society," in Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972), 5–41 (essay available at: https://www.uvm.edu/~jdericks/EE/Sahlins-Original_Affluent_Society.pdf).

²⁴ There is said to have been a maximum of three million inhabitants of the earth 35,000 years ago (Scott (as fn. 8), 6).

²⁵ Ryan and Jethá (as fn. 6), 206–208.

²⁶ Graeber and Wengrow (as fn. 9, 443–446), discuss this approvingly. On Scott's book, see the thorough review by Jochen Schwenk: <https://www.soziopolis.de/die-muehlen-der-zivilisation-1.html>.

David Graeber and David Wengrow supplement this perspective in a comprehensive manner: Over the last 10,000 years, there have been very different models of society, often temporally parallel, sometimes also regionally close to each other. These included large settlements that lasted for centuries – with no evidence of wars or excess violence being found there today.

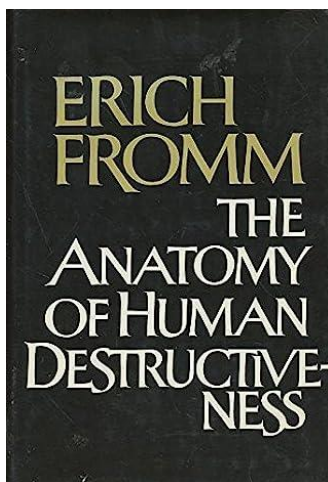
Some of you may have heard of the Anatolian settlement of Catal Hüyük. It existed for about 1500 years beginning in 7400 BCE, had an area extending to 13 hectares and as many as 5000 inhabitants. Access to food and material possessions were apparently distributed quite evenly; there is no evidence of a central authority responsible for order, let alone oppression, and there is just as little evidence of violent crime or murderous struggles.

However only 5% of this settlement has been archaeologically explored so far.²⁷ Nonetheless, this is also a strong indication that wars are NOT a constant of humankind.

Ethnography

By means of ethnographic research carried out up to the present day, it can also still be *proven* beyond doubt that human beings are able to live peacefully with each other over the long haul.

The psychoanalyst and social researcher Erich Fromm is one of those who collected reports on different ethnic groups.



In his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, published in 1973, one reads that even in the second half of the 20th century there were stable, life-affirming, unwarlike, often matriarchally-oriented social associations in which there was no need to hold down an alleged instinct to kill.²⁸

As late as 1998, the ethnographic atlas listed 160 “purely matrilineal” – that is, considering only maternal descent – “indigenous peoples and ethnic groups.” That was still about 13% of the 1267 ethnic groups recorded worldwide.²⁹

Incidentally, Erich Fromm's book is to my knowledge the most comprehensive compilation of arguments from psychoanalysis, (social) psychology, paleontology, anthropology, archaeology, neurophysiology, animal psychology, and historical science that speak for an innate human tendency to cooperation and peacefulness.

²⁷ Graeber and Wengrow (as fn. 9), 212–214, 223.

²⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1973), 158–172.

²⁹ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matriarchat>

The question of whether we come into the world as potential killers can also be examined on the basis of *individual biographies*. The biographies of people who have committed such serious crimes as instigating war and mass murder make them seem likely candidates for having been predestined in this way – but do their biographies really support that conclusion?

Goebbels

Joseph Goebbels,³⁰ born 1897, became later as Nazi Propaganda Minister one of the main proponents of the Nazi state's anti-Jewish, anti-Communist, and anti-Russian warmongering.

A passionate enthusiast in his childhood and youth, Goebbels wrote poems, plays, and piano pieces; he read Gottfried Keller, Theodor Storm, Schiller, and Goethe among other authors. He fell in love and hoped for a life full of love and recognition.

The fact that this hope visibly failed was due in part to the clubfoot he developed as a child – or rather, due to negative reactions to this disability. For his strict Catholic parents, it represented a 'affliction' that was best denied. Among relatives and classmates, it triggered aversion and even disgust, as later also among some of the women he desired.

Over time, the substitute object "fatherland" came to the fore in place of unfulfilled love for other people. But still in 1919, as a 22-year-old with a "völkisch" (nationalist) attitude, Goebbels successfully applied for a doctorate under a *Jewish* professor and described him to be "an extraordinarily kind" and "obliging man".

In 1920, Goebbels reflected on the initially victorious 'leftist' mass uprising in West Germany against reactionary Freikorps (volunteer paramilitary troops) and the Reichswehr (the German army) thus: "*Red Revolution in the Ruhr region I am enthusiastic from a distance.*"

In search of a 'genius' who might redeem him and Germany, he first heard of Adolf Hitler in 192 – and was disappointed. He wrote: "*Just seeing a swastika gives me the urge to shit right then and there.*"

But professional and private frustrations, unemployment, hunger, existential insecurity followed, and mental problems accumulated: feelings of futility, suicidal thoughts, alcohol abuse, nervous breakdowns. At this point "*phases of deep depression*" alternated with "*outbursts of fanatical will.*"

³⁰ See Andreas Peglau, *Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert. Wilhelm Reichs "Massenpsychologie des Faschismus" als Erklärungsansatz*, 2nd ed. [= *Rightward Regression in the 21st century: Wilhelm Reich's "Mass Psychology of Fascism" as an Explanatory Approach*] (Berlin: Nora, 2017), 64–65. Available at: <https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Rechtsruck-Zweite-Auflage-3-11-17-1.pdf>.

In 1922, he learned from his fiancée that she was a “half-Jew”; he was irritated but did not end the relationship at first.

In 1924, he was still able to find positive sides to Karl Marx’s *Capital*.

But gradually he fell completely under the spell of National Socialist ideology and the Führer cult, not least because they allowed him to suppress feelings of inferiority and depression. Now – as he wrote – “a white cloud in the sky above took the form of a *swastika*.” The unconditional follower of Hitler was ready.

Admittedly, this process took almost 30 years.

Hitler



Hardly anyone else has been the subject of so many publications as Adolf Hitler. Recently a book has appeared that brings together the current state of knowledge about his childhood and youth: *Hitler – Prägende Jahre* (Hitler – Formative Years).³¹

From this book one gets the same picture again: the pubescent Hitler was obviously increasingly characterized by self-esteem problems compensated by ideas of grandeur; doggedness, stubbornness, and verbal aggressiveness also increased.

But this was no surprise, even common, given the sometimes brutally oppressive treatment of children and young people typical of the time, to which he was also exposed.

And Hitler was able to preserve another side for a long time, namely, an emotional vibrancy.

The Jewish doctor Eduard Bloch, who had tried in vain to save the mother of the then 18-year-old Hitler from dying of cancer, described decades later how he had perceived the son on the day of his mother’s death:

“Adolf, whose face showed the overtiredness of a sleepless night, sat next to his mother. To capture a last impression of her, he had drawn her In my career I have never seen anyone so destroyed by grief as Adolf Hitler. ... No one at that time would have guessed in the least that he would one day become the embodiment of all wickedness.”³²

³¹ Hannes Leidinger and Christian Rapp, *Hitler – Prägende Jahre: Kindheit und Jugend 1889-1914* (Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 2020).

³² Ibid, p. 152.

Thus one cannot allege that even Goebbels or Hitler were born monsters, that they had received some warrior-nature as they landed in the cradle.

In a Nutshell

1) *The assertion “Ever since humans have existed, there have been warlike conflicts” cannot be proven and is therefore unscientific.*

2) *The question whether we are “born warriors” can very well be scientifically examined – and answered with a clear NO.*

Even the politicians who today again instigate war and mass murder, even those who then carry out these murders, were born not many years ago as good human beings.

Perhaps those of you who have children of your own, or have sufficiently intensive contact with young children, can also briefly consider whether you perceive these children as *gratuitously* aggressive or even destructive – as ‘born warriors’ to whom you’d want to ascribe a willingness to kill.

There are now numerous findings from various branches of science that prove that we come into the world with the potential for *pro*-social behavior, for love, friendship, cooperation, and peacefulness.³³

In other words, we have all the necessary conditions to be good people within a good society.

Psychic unity

Building on this, a plausible speculation about human early history or prehistory is once more possible.

A thesis accepted by many scientists today is to assume a “psychic unity” for *all* representatives of *Homo sapiens*. In other words: ever since there have been modern human beings, they have been equipped with similar psychic predispositions.

³³ In addition to the books used in this text, see Gerald Hüther, *Die Evolution der Liebe. Was Darwin bereits ahnte und die Darwinisten nicht wahrhaben wollen* [= *The Evolution of Love: What Darwin already suspected and the Darwinists do not want to admit*] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2012); Mark Solms and Oliver Turnbull, *The Brain and the Inner World: An Introduction to the Neuroscience of the Subjective Experience* (New York: Other Press, 2002); Michael Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Stefan Klein, *Der Sinn des Gebens: Warum Selbstlosigkeit in der Evolution siegt und wir mit Egoismus nicht weiterkommen* [= *The Meaning of Giving: Why selflessness triumphs in evolution and we don't get anywhere with egotism*] (Flörsheim am Main: Fischer, 2010); Joachim Bauer, *Selbststeuerung: Die Wiederentdeckung des freien Willens* [= *Self-Regulation: The rediscovery of free will*] (Munich: Blessing Verlag, 2015). Also check out Erwin Wagenhofer's film documentary (2013), *Alphabet – Angst oder Liebe*, which illustrates this in a touching way (<https://www.alphabet-film.com/>).

Graeber and Wengrow write in this regard: “even those who make their living hunting elephants or gathering lotus buds are just as sceptical, imaginative, thoughtful and capable of critical analysis as those who make their living by operating tractors, managing restaurants or chairing university departments.”³⁴

The same can be said about the Neanderthals, who are to be distinguished from *Homo sapiens* but have been mixed with them through reproduction. Hannes Stubbe sums up: even if some scientists “*find it difficult to admit this, today we have to accept the Neanderthal as a full-fledged human being with all mental, psychological and social functions, powers and competences.*”³⁵ Besides, Neanderthals had a bigger brain than we do.³⁶

Thus one can assume that even our most distant human ancestors were no more war-like than we are by birth.

And today?

If there is the potential in us to be good people in a good society – what is the reason if this potential does *not* unfold?

Because of the fact that we do not live in a good society.

Children are in no way less valuable than adults. Compared to the latter, however, they have hardly any opportunities to determine their own living conditions.

In a world like ours, which is characterized by authoritarian hierarchies, exploitation, oppression, family and state control, and environmental destruction, there is little room for the development of psychologically healthy children.

The resulting suffering and deprivation, their often inadequately satisfied needs, cause grief, pain, and anger – which, as a rule, may not be adequately expressed to their educators.

For this reason these feelings get dammed up until they reach destructive proportions – a condition later reinforced by humiliations at school, in training, and in the professional and working spheres. Since even such dammed-up feelings are usually not allowed to be acted out officially – unless, e.g., one becomes a soldier – they are hidden behind a façade of social conformity, politeness, and niceness.

³⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, (as fn. 9)96. See also Bregman, (as fn. 6) 54–70.

³⁵ Stubbe (as fn. 8), p. 33.

³⁶ This does not have to mean – but can mean – that they were more intelligent than we are (cf. *ibid.*, p. 25).

This is how the “authoritarian character”³⁷ — comes into being, even still: bowing to those above and stepping on those below.³⁸

And this has highly alarming consequences for the entire social fabric. Not least because destructive emotions can at any time burst out of hiding, given the occasion — all the more easily can this occur when socially weaker people or demonized “foreigners,” such as currently once again “evil Russians” or probably soon “evil Chinese” are available as target objects for this, that is, are made available for this by the media and politics.

Human beings — we, our children — are in this way are made “suited for war” again today.³⁹

Wilhelm Reich described the basic process in 1933 as follows: “The moralistic inhibition of the child’s natural sexuality” makes it “anxious, shy, fearful of authority, well-behaved and educable in the bourgeois sense.” The child first passes through “the authoritarian miniature state of the family ... in order later to be able to fit into the general social framework.” The dammed-up sexual energy, if it does not find a natural outlet after suffering the process of upbringing, now looks for substitute outlets, flows into natural aggression and cranks this up “into brutal sadism, which is an essential part of the mass psychological basis of the kind of war that is instigated by some few people for their imperialist interests.” The human being who is psychologically deformed in this way “acts, feels, and thinks” contrary to the vital interests of human beings.

The more we have dammed-up aggression and the more we are impaired in our self-esteem, the more usable we are for all kinds of destructive purposes, whether these are dressed up with nationalist, neo-fascist, fundamentalist, imperialist, environmentally destructive, anti-children, anti-women, homophobic, or xenophobic ideologies.

If the dammed-up explosive rage on a mass basis offered an outlet, the underlying convictions are interchangeable: terror and murder can be perpetrated with the alibi of ‘right-wing’ as well as ‘left-wing’ world views: for the glory of God, for Allah’s sake, for the benefit of an eco-dictatorship or — as at present — as a component of Western, neoliberal, “rule-based” world order.

³⁷ See https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/duepublico_derivate_00045266/05_Peglau_Autoritarismus.pdf. For discussion in English, see: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-021-00819-5>

³⁸ This alludes to a German proverb (*nach oben buckeln, nach unten treten* = “bow to those above, step on those below”) that expresses the brutality of the relationships between social classes in authoritarian societies.

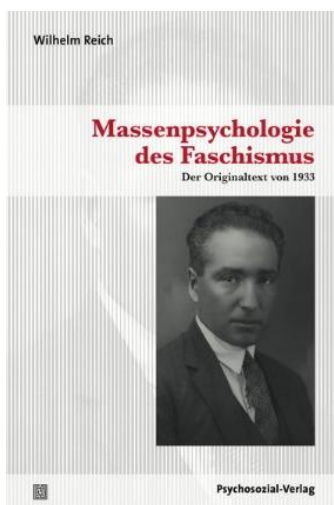
³⁹ See Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus: Der Originaltext von 1933* [= *Mass Psychology of Fascism: The Original Text from 1933*] (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2020), 38, 40.

Perspectives

The question remains: What has to happen so that human beings WILL become as peaceful again as they apparently come into the world – or, even better, so that they can STAY so peaceful right away?

Because I have already expressed my view of this several times,⁴⁰ here I will here only touch lightly down on it.

We still need a radical transformation of economic and political conditions, an exit from our increasingly destructive, neoliberal-capitalist social structure. But that alone is not enough, as the ultimately unsuccessful experiment of ‘real socialism’ has shown. This must be supplemented by a *psychosocial* revolution.



Wilhelm Reich summed up the underlying connection as early as 1934: “If you try to change the structure of people alone, society resists. If one tries to change society alone, the people resist. This shows that not a single thing can be changed on its own.”⁴¹

For our present time, this could be concretized as follows: adults should work on their inherited mental disorders – mostly by recourse to psychotherapeutic knowledge – and at the same time ensure that their children and grandchildren are spared from developing these disorders in the first place.⁴²

So it is about accompanying children lovingly into life, actively striving for good and equal partnerships, fulfilled sexuality, and mental health. And it is about privately and publicly denouncing authoritarian norms that are hostile to life or even incite war in the family, school, profession, media, church, politics and state – and looking for like-minded people with whom to resist them.

The most succinct description of the long-term goal of such efforts comes from Erich Fromm: a healthy society in which “no one is threatened any longer: not the child by the parent; not the parents by the superior; no social class by another; no nation by a superpower.”⁴³

⁴⁰ For example here: <https://www.manova.news/artikel/rechtsruck-in-deutschland>

⁴¹ Reich (as fn. 39), 195.

⁴² Hans-Joachim Maaz already elaborated on this in 1989 in his concept of a “therapeutic culture”, see also here: <https://andreas-pegelau-psychoanalyse.de/psychische-revolution-und-therapeutische-kultur-vorschlaege-fuer-ein-alternatives-leben/>

⁴³ Fromm (as fn. 28), 435.

Forwarding and distributing this text for non-commercial purposes is expressly encouraged.

Please cite as Andreas Peglau (2023): “Are we born warriors? On Psychosocial Preconditions of Peacefulness and Destructiveness” (<https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/are-we-born-warriors/>)