

Can War be Eliminated?, by Christopher Coker, Cambridge, UK, and Malden, US: Polity Press, 2014, pp. 121, \$12.95

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Imagine a book that talks of war, of all wars that have been fought in all of human history. One could be forgiven for assuming that such a volume would run into hundreds of volumes and hundreds of thousands of pages. On the contrary, Christopher Coker's *Can War be Eliminated?* is probably the slimmest volume on the shelf on the subject of war. That is because in this book, Coker is not interested in engaging into a conversation about specific wars. He instead speaks of war as a phenomenon in itself, a phenomenon whose military nature is only an aspect and not the core. Additionally, he thinks of war as a phenomenon that is intricately linked to culture, of all civilizations, ever since humans first realized the difference between themselves and other primates. Over six sections, he traces the evolution of war and answers the titular question of the book in the negative.

In the first section, entitled 'Evolution', Coker presents the evolutionary imperative of war, drawing from a range of disciplines such as evolutionary biology, anthropology, history, and philosophy. The key argument of this section being that war, like religion, has an adaptive value and is programmed into the 'inherited biology' of humans and, as such, there is no escape from war in any foreseeable future as war is informed by the evolutionary diktat of 'survival of the fittest'. Hereon,

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Coker moves on to make the cultural argument for war. He successfully refutes John Mueller's proposition that war is merely an idea and it may just become unfashionable like ideas such as slavery and duelling. Coker counters that just as slavery and duelling did not really cease to exist but simply transformed themselves into modern forms such as bonded labour and court cases, similarly, war, because it is as hardwired as religion and a 'deeply ingrained cultural practice', would continue to keep morphing into newer forms as long as it has even the least bit of an evolutionary role. Thus, speaking of the interface between war and technology, Coker asserts that technology is 'devaluing the sacramental ideal of war and persuading us to overvalue technical efficiency', but because culture requires that humans only increase specialization, we will continue to have a 'talent for war'. Thus, the present digital age is only another instance of how evolution and technology run parallel to each other, and cyberspace having already been taken up by war as the next frontier, Coker seems to predict, will involve 'war by algebra', a war where algorithms will rule.

Delving into the geopolitical aspect of war, Coker tells us of how despite the apparent redundancy of territory and borders, following globalization, it rears its head in newer forms on newer frontiers, such as cyberspace or the Chinese 'scramble for Africa' (not his term), potentially preparing the world for resource wars. This part of the book sounds somewhat dated as resource conflicts are not too far away in the future; indeed some are occurring as we speak. We need only look towards India's disputes with all its neighbours over water, or the fight of global multinationals against the indigenous people in the Red Corridor of India that threatens to blow up into a full-fledged civil war, to realize that resource wars are already here. The inclusion of such examples in the book would have made it more relevant to the current context, and for this reviewer, this oversight is baffling, to say the least.

Section 5, entitled 'Peace', is little more than an aggregate of how the notion of peace has been ideated over the centuries by various philosophical traditions, particularly European, with the only takeaway of this section being a recommendation, a bizarre and cheeky one at that, that scholars who predict peace or otherwise need not be taken too seriously as they have repeatedly proved inefficient at predicting either. One wonders, then, why Coker himself should be taken seriously! The book concludes with the thought that 'until such time as [war] reaches an evolutionary dead-end we are more likely than not to remain in the war business.' It makes a call to 'endists', scholars who proclaim that war is

nearing its end, to present better arguments should they want to be more persuasive.

A word of caution here for the reader. At the very beginning, in the Prologue, when the author declares the core of his argument as being: '[War] has played such a central role in the human story because it is embedded in our cultural evolution...and is likely to remain the case for some time yet', a casual reader may read it as an endorsement for war, as the rest of the volume is only likely to reinforce this impression. This is far from what emerges from the reading of the book. The book is not presented as an endorsement of war. On the contrary, it attempts to look at war with a dispassionate eye and analyse it for what it thinks it is: a cultural and evolutionary phenomenon, rather than the outcome of some deranged war-mongering minds out to destroy the world. (The eternal sceptic may raise an eyebrow and may ask if it is an implied defence of the Western war leaders: Napoleon, Churchill, Hitler, Stalin, etc.!) In fact, as it emerges, the argument seems to be poised at other end of the spectrum: that destructive though war may be, the premise of warmaking is not destruction but preservation—of in-group solidarity, of the tribe, of the imagined nation and so on.

An otherwise eminently readable book, it has its share of drawbacks. Section divisions for a volume this slim are a bit jarring, especially when the format is narrative rather than a hardcore scholarly one. Perhaps one continuous narrative essay would have been better. This, however, is quite forgivable when compared with the other major flaw. The vantage point of the book is persistently anglophone/West-centric, and despite the claims of this conversation about being war in general, it is hard not to notice the Orientalist eye. The underlying subconscious(?) intellectual assumptions are decidedly occidental and Orientalist in their orientation. This, however, is not really so unexpected, coming from somebody located squarely at the centre of a former worldwide empire, the lost glory of which has been the subject matter of much lamentation.