The Role of Fear in the Agonistic Complex (Part IV)

by Johan M.G. van der Dennen

The Role of Fear in the Genesis of Primitive War

“When the first prehistoric tribe discovered that organization and weapons could eliminate danger from rival tribes – that, surely, was when war was born” (Humble, 1980).

Pre-cultural man, according to Simeons (1960), was the most timid of mammals. His outsized brain developed during a period when his response to threat was early flight. Being on the defensive enormously enhanced his inventiveness.

Simeons theorizes that the human individual’s basic instinct along with sex, hunger and sleep – is fear. It was only after the development of tools and human culture that this creature, whose biological nature is entirely pusillanimous, was forced to become fierce and brave. The conflict between his innate impulse to flee and his culturally induced resolve to ignore danger is precisely what causes his multitude of psychosomatic diseases, which Simeons describes in detail.

“This may sound like Freud turned inside out, but it gains force when one considers the enormous amounts of cultural energy devoted to the establishment of aggression. If men were innate killers, one would think it easier to turn them into warriors. Throughout civilized history, societies have been able to create aggressive killers only by the use of extreme social pressure, medals, harsh discipline, depersonalization, ‘a cause greater than life itself’, threats, punishment, and finally the execution of those who fail to kill” (Simeons, 1960; Cf. Andreski, 1968).

Scott (1974; 1976; 1981) advanced the notion of early man as a ‘fear-biter’. Scott holds that early man was not basically biologically adapted as a predator, and that he has only become one secondarily by the use of tools. According to him, early men and women must have been few in numbers and relatively weak and defenseless. They may have been able to survive only in those rocky and arid places that would not support the large predators and where their principal competitors would be the relatively small and weak species like jackals.

Before they developed efficient tools for hunting (and even such tools as spears and bows and arrows are relatively ineffective against large predators like lions), human beings may have been able to survive only by being extremely timid and wary of danger and, secondarily, by pretending to be brave, by putting on a show of bravery.

“We therefore arrive at a picture of primitive man, not as a fierce, dangerous, and constantly aggressive individual but rather as a relatively small, slight, and fearful being, finding safety only in groups, sometimes being called up to act bravely, but actually inflicting damage only when extremely fearful. I am suggesting that if there is any genetic carry-over into modern life from the agonistic behavior that was adaptive for our remote plains-living ancestors, it should take the form of excessive timidity rather than raging and destructiveness arising from a constantly boiling reservoir of aggression”.
He points out that people become violent when they are afraid, when they are trapped, and when they are overwhelmed by circumstances. Under these conditions they often act like cornered rats or fear-biting dogs, without regard to either the amount of injury which they may inflict or the risk to their own lives. Also, defensive behavior that would be adaptive against a dangerous predator may be directed against one’s own species. Some recognition that this behavior is inappropriate is indicated by the finding that most people who commonly direct violent behavior against others, as in warfare of persecution, find it necessary to dehumanize their victims and classify them as fiends, inhuman animals, and the like.

Scott’s argument for the fearful nature of primitive man is necessarily speculative and based on circumstantial evidence. However, Schuck (1976) points out that we also have strong experimental evidence that fear and pain are highly effective in producing certain kinds of learning in both man and other animals. Learning based on fear and pain tends to be stereotyped, inflexible, and resistant to extinction. It is easy to manipulate, especially in situations of crisis. Whatever its evolutionary history, the tendency to react strongly to fear-producing stimuli is easily demonstrated in modern man. “In terms of the multifactorial theory of agonistic behavior, fear is an additional factor on the physiological level, and possibly an important one”.

“One general characteristic that sets man apart from the rest of the animal world is a greater capacity for using tools. Humans are users of all sorts of tools, and it is this general capacity, determined by both biological and cultural factors, that is perhaps the best general explanation of human violence. Violence can be used as a tool, and men can employ it in a variety of ways with or without direct biological motivation... fear may be a much more fundamental and important cause of violent behavior than is anger... Man’s inherent difficulties with violence may not be so much the result of his emotional reactions which, after all, have for millions of years been modified by evolutionary processes toward adaptive and useful behavior, but rather that man has too quick an intelligence and hence is too ready to act on the basis of ideas that may turn out to be false” (Scott, 1976).

In short, instead of the picture of man as a bloodthirsty savage, or a ferocious killer-ape, Scott suggests the alternate picture of the fear-biter.

In a later article (Scott, 1981), he adds: “Once tools were developed for hunting prey animals, it must have been quickly obvious that the same tools could be used against other humans. Even before specialized tools were developed, an attacked individual may well have picked up a rock in order to defend himself. From this it would be only a step to using the rock aggressively to obtain something from another person. This is, of course, intrinsically the same as modern criminal violence, where weapons are used to obtain money, possessions, or in the case of rape, sex. It must also have occurred to early humans, as it does to rhesus monkeys, that two weaker individuals can overcome one strong one by combining an attack. Such cooperative agonistic behavior could easily develop into war, a supertool whose rapid cultural evolution has been documented since the dawn of history”.

Scott’s view accords rather well with modern ethological analyses of fear and aggression in mammals as provided by Archer (1976), Rasa (1981), Scott (e.g. 1981), and Van der Molen & Van der Dennen (1981, 1983; Vide supra).
Furthermore, Scott’s view is well in accordance with the analysis of the causes and motives of primitive warfare as presented by Meyer (1977). Meyer summarizes his analysis as follows:


Also in the genesis of contemporary wars, fear and threat perception may play prominent roles. Senghaas (1968) discusses the role of fixed ‘Feindbilder’ and the autistic ‘Drohphantasie’ in the escalating process toward war, while Horn (1970a,b; 1972) even speaks of a ‘paranoid inversion’ as a dynamic underlying massive violence.

“A persistent cause of war has been the readiness of societies to resort to organized force in order to reduce or remove a perceived threat to their security or to their religious, political, ideological, economic or sociocultural value systems. Undoubtedly there have been times when the threat perceived was real and proximate, or even imminent, just as there have been times when the threat was so remote as to be virtually imaginary” (Dougherty & Pfalzgraff, 1971).

Finally, the historian Taylor (1979), who studied many contemporary wars, states: “Wars in fact have sprung more from apprehension than from a lust for war or for conquest. Paradoxically, many of the European wars were started by a threatened power which had nothing to gain by war and much to lose”.

On the modern battlefield itself the situation is no different: fear is the most commonly reported emotion in battle (Marshall, 1947; Potegal, 1979).

In these paragraphs we have considered fear to be a generic concept encompassing such terms as ‘startle’, ‘anxiety’, ‘apprehension’, ‘angst’, ‘being terrified’, ‘panic’, etc., which may be distinguished by a time dimension and an intensity dimension. Fear describes a situation in which an organism perceives danger or a threat to its very existence, and/or becomes aware of a growing feeling of insecurity.

According to many authors (e.g. Steinmetz, 1892-4; Percin, 1914; Freud, 1917; Van der Bij, 1929; Dollard, 1938; Hebb & Riesen, 1943; Marshall, 1947; Sartre, 1948; Sullivan, 1950; Vestdijk, 1968; Ellis, 1982), in humans the dynamics of fear can have stimulating, innervating, or paralyzing and suffocating (immobility) effects on behavior; it may be object-related or ‘free-floating’; range from adequate to pathological (as in phobias and paranoid states); and be state- or trait-related.
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