

**Bear F. Braumoeller. *Only the dead: the persistence of war in the modern age*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2019. ISBN: 978-0-1908-4953-5. 314pp. Hb.: £21.97.**

In recent years, much scholarship about the decline of war has been motivated by a new wave of research, arguing that there is a general civilizational process in human history which is driving humanity away from violence, especially inter-state wars and conflicts. Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is a key example of the civilizational theory of war. Joshua Goldstein's *Winning the War on War* and John Muller's *The Remnants of War* support the idea that, since the end of the Cold War, war has declined because it has lost its meaningful propose. By using varied data sets that seem to contradict trends reported in the media, these authors have gained recognition for promoting a more optimistic idea of conflict around the world. In his new book, *Only the dead: the persistence of war in the modern age*, Bear F. Braumoeller questions their optimistic findings.

Braumoeller's book challenges the decline of war thesis from multiple angles. He does so, first, through the lens of statistics, basing his argument on previous work by Cirillo and Taleb.<sup>1</sup> Then, as a direct response to Pinker, he questions the theoretical and empirical assumptions of the declinist theory. But, fortunately, Braumoeller intends his book to serve not only as a rebuff to the decline of war thesis, but also as an analysis of trends in conflict in the last centuries more generally.

Braumoeller begins by addressing an obvious flaw in Pinker's book: the denominator of the casualties in war used by Pinker did not consider the changing number of countries through the course of the twentieth century. Braumoeller replicates the data used by Pinker, Muller, and Goldstein, mainly the Data on Armed Conflict of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and The Correlates of War Project. By correcting the denominator and using different variables, like the number of wars, their intensity, deadliness, duration and the number of casualties, he shows that even since the end of the Cold War, no such decline of war has occurred. For example, Braumoeller highlights the incorrect measures of battlefield deaths during both the Korean and Vietnam wars. By only comparing battle deaths per year, the figures give

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<sup>1</sup> P. Cirillo & N. N. Taleb, 'On the statistical properties and tail risk of violent conflicts', in *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and its Applications*, Vol. 452 (2016), pp. 29-45.

the illusion that conflicts become less deadly over time. In this case, Vietnam seems less deadly than Korea. But in total, the Vietnam War led to more than 1,400,000 deaths, while the Korean War had less than one million. By using this example, and more sophisticated and logically applied statistical tests, Braumoeller shows that the way in which data is analysed can lead to misunderstandings and exaggerations.

Beyond these statistical tests, Braumoeller also considers deeper questions around the quality of data on conflict. He asserts that any study based on available data must address the problems of coding, classifications, and of sources. Specifically, one issue in conflict data that remains highly contested is the number of deaths in conflict, either measured as casualties or combat deaths. Many ongoing conflicts count the total number of deaths, while others only register the casualties that armies and authorities can count at hand. This difference in numbers can radically change the statistical outcome. Krause has previously made an informed assessment on this topic. In the case of the Iraq War (2003–2011), for example, Krause shows how the Uppsala Conflict Data Program counts double the deaths as the Iraq Body Count of 2011. This is due to the counting rules, the estimations made by both research groups, and the sources used.<sup>2</sup> This issue also applies for historical records and estimations based in secondary data, both of which Pinker relies on in his book as a proof of how deadly conflicts in antiquity were.

However, the main thrust of Pinker's work goes beyond a simple argument on the deadliness of war and conflict. He is interested in the scale of violence worldwide and how this supports Norbert Elias's theory of civilization process. While Braumoeller acknowledges this, he devotes most of his critique to the data estimates used by Pinker. Although he does, cleverly, refer to the work of Elias to contradict Pinker's findings, he does not adequately address his arguments about violence in general. This is understandable, perhaps, as the book is a work of International Relations and not sociology, but if Braumoeller intended it as a rebuff to Pinker, he could have devoted more attention to the wider argument on forms of violence. Lastly, on the matter of other forms of violence, Braumoeller briefly addresses casualties in civil wars, but only presents the

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<sup>2</sup> K. Krause, 'Challenges to Counting and Classifying Victims of Violence in Conflict, Post-Conflict, and Non-Conflict Settings', in T. B. Seybolt; J. D. Aronson & B. Fisch, *Counting Civilian Casualties. An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 268.

data in the annex. Although this is an understandable choice, analysing the data in the main body of the book could have strengthened his critique of Pinker. Readers would then have been shown that there is a rising trend in the number of casualties (civilian and combatant) in civil wars. This is especially interesting as the rise in the deadliness of civil wars seems to coincide with the end of the Cold War.

Paradoxically, Braumoeller's work overlaps in places with arguments put forward by proponents of democratic peace theory and capitalist peace theory, as both are grounded in the assumption of anarchy in world order. Braumoeller could have done more to address these arguments and to present a bolder systemic theory of his own, as he did in his previous book, *The Great Powers and the International System*. But Braumoeller is cautious about his own judgements and makes clear that current data and trends are contingent. It is also worth noting that the groundwork for the book's theory testing led to the publication of many articles in major journals. The efforts of Braumoeller and his research team to replicate results led to an interesting and counterintuitive conclusion: even though the end of the Cold War seems to be the main containment of some conflicts, there is no consistent variable explaining this trend over time. Their work could form the basis of a book in itself if the research team were so inclined.

Many a key contribution to scientific knowledge has been made by replicating and contesting influential arguments. As Robert K. Merton argued, the social sciences are not yet able to establish grand theories of social behaviour, and Braumoeller does an exemplary job of testing and building middle range theories, rather than grandiloquent arguments like Pinker. Theory testing and replication should be encouraged more than the building of grand arguments, particularly when their makers are not cautious with their use of the empirical evidence.

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