

Book Reviews

Mike Martin. *Why we Fight: The Cognitive Basis for War*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2018. ISBN 978-18-49-04889-7. Pp. xii, 311. Hardback, £20.00.

Interdisciplinarity, although often used as a buzzword, is equally often a truly valid aim to achieve. The barriers between different fields of research can in fact prevent ideas from freely travelling across domains and from bringing new discoveries and findings to everyone's attention. This amounts to many missed opportunities to place our understanding of human nature and the problems of our time on firmer ground. When interdisciplinary research is done well, however, it can provide these better foundations, as well as permanently bridge even very different domains. At its best, interdisciplinarity can reveal paths and connections that naturally flow between one field and another, leading one to wonder if the research is truly interdisciplinary at all.

This is exactly what Mike Martin does in his book *Why we Fight: The Cognitive Basis for War*, and it is the greatest contribution that he provides to the conflict studies literature, and especially to the debate regarding the titular question. Mike Martin takes the latter and brings together the whole richness of the research on the human mind conducted in evolutionary biology, philosophy, and the cognitive sciences. He does it so well that everything flows smoothly from its conceptual and scientific foundations, such as the theory of evolution itself, up to its core argument, namely, that things such as moral codes, religious perceptions and practices, as well as ideologies broadly defined (what the author calls 'frameworks') do not make people fight, but actually help greatly in reducing the level of violence. The real reasons why humans fight actually reside in our subconscious drives. (pp. 1-4) It is, in turn, evolution by natural selection that shaped these drives over millions of years.

The book brings in support of its argument a wide array of findings and theoretical advances from a host of different fields. For this reason, it doubles as a relatively concise summary of the state of the art of research on the working of the human mind.¹ This, in itself, is already a commendable achievement. The author himself acknowledges, these fields are in constantly evolving and progressing, and new, unexpected findings may well shatter some of the seemingly firmest theories, including those that are at the basis of his book. Martin, however, does not attempt to hide or marginalise this fact. He admits on several occasions that his book may well become outdated in a few years' time.

This, however, does not make the work less important, nor his endeavour less helpful. The advances achieved in the cognitive sciences in the past twenty years are impressive and have much enlarged our understanding of how the human brain works. Awareness of such a fundamental progress should not stay within the confines of evolutionary psychology, the medical sciences, or philosophy. Within this context, a work which connects the two domains and sheds some light on the deeper reasons for which people fight is particularly welcome, not least because it was long overdue in the field of conflict studies. (pp. 11-15)

The personal experience of the author is an integral part of this book, both for the narration and as the fundamental reason for writing it. Mike Martin served as an officer in the British Army in Afghanistan, both in combat roles and as a trainer and advisor to other officers. During that time, he recounts, he had many opportunities to witness the dissonance between the official version of the war and the actual reasons for which people fought in it. (pp. ix, 123-25) British authorities at the time, were casting the UK's presence in that country as a conflict between ideologies: Western democratic liberalism on one side, and radical Islamism of the Taliban on the other. Martin, however, witnessed Afghans fighting for decades-old feuds, or to avenge a dead relative, rather than for religious reasons. The British themselves were also not behaving according to their own authorities' narrative of counterinsurgency based on democratic values: 'this idealism never, except in very rare cases, survived the first casualty.' (p. 191) As soon as soldiers started having their first true battle experiences, they began to justify their

¹ The book summarises several fundamental advances from biology, philosophy, and the cognitive sciences in 225 pages.

participation in the war in terms of defeating the enemy and giving meaning to the death of their comrades. On both sides, then, the behaviour of fighters, and often even their words, contradicted the official narrative and the scholarly theories explaining conflicts as clashes of different visions of the world. (pp. 191-93)

In the book, Martin proceeds to build on the intuition he developed while serving in Afghanistan with an elegant argument that starts from the very basics of evolutionary thought up to the latest explorations of the way the human brain works. The effectiveness of this argument lies exactly in this logical progression. He claims that moral codes, religions, and ideologies (the 'frameworks') do not cause conflict, but, on the contrary, they limit it. Martin goes against the idea of the mind as a 'blank slate', a vision that had been supported by the likes of Aristotle, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. On the contrary, he shows how the human brain has been shaped over evolutionary time, with various 'modules' solving specific evolutionary problems, albeit with much overlapping and many connections between them. (pp. 28-34)

The most important evolutionary problem of all is how to increase reproductive fitness, in order to have the largest possible offspring survive and bring the individual's genes to the next generations. Reproductive fitness depends on access to fundamental resources, such as food, water, and sexual paring. (pp. 57-59) There are, however, 'surrogate resources', like territory, status, and group membership, that most of the time lead to larger access to essential resources. (pp. 58-61) It is one of those surrogate resources, status, which, in Martin's view, actually causes conflict between human groups. (pp. 57-81)

Escaping competitive status-seeking is possible through belonging, which, however, presupposes the division of the world between an in-group and an out-group, due to the physiological mechanism that causes the feeling of belonging in the first place. (pp. 83-99) This causes the human species to divide into groups that will then end up, from time to time, fighting each other. What frameworks actually accomplish is to solve the problems of group-living that have plagued the existence of human groups ever since our ancestors roamed the in bands of hunters-gatherers in the Pleistocene. (pp. 107-14) By solving the problems of group living, frameworks help groups to grow larger, thus actually driving down internal violence and in turn reducing the overall level of conflict in human societies. (pp. 115-22)

This argument is then very broad, and the author's attempt to cover a lot of ground might at times leave the impression that he is simplifying some questions which are actually more complex. Of course, entire libraries could be filled with the debates that occurred or are still occurring in all fields examining the subjects touched in the book. Martin openly acknowledges this. It should therefore be understandable that, for conciseness' and argument's sake, Martin does not aim at representing every single position that the various schools of thought or strains of research are occupying on such fundamental topics as the evolution of human behaviour or the nature of reasoning and consciousness.

Having said that, one has to concede that sometimes the author does devote too little space to covering some of the topic, as is the case with the 'free will' subsection which exposes an argument that dispenses with the titular idea in less than two pages. (pp. 139-41) In the author's defence, he does not espouse fully the argument, nor does he actually need to do so in order to support his claims. If this, however, is the case, perhaps it would have been better to steer clear of the whole topic, and thus avoid the danger of overly simplifying such a contentious subject, on which several schools of thought are still conducting a fierce debate.

The same impression of excessive brevity surfaces in the chapter on ideology, which covers only fifteen pages, with the topics of social networks and clustering condensed in barely five. (pp. 175-190) For the sake of the author's own argument, devoting some more space to this part of the argument to better explain the concepts in it would have been the wiser choice.

Another point to raise is the author's occasional choice of words that may leave the reader confused as to the his fundamental tenets. Martin often refers to the 'frameworks' as the individuals' 'socially constructed illusion of reality'. (e.g. on pp. 160, 170, 178) This expression may seem to place Martin fully within constructivism, even though he had clearly rejected the 'blank slate' vision of the mind just a few chapters before. What Martin refers to is the claim that each human constructs their reality according to the group they belong to and the framework they adhere to. It is clear, however, that an underlying reality *does* exist, and it consists in the relentless, age-old activity of evolution by natural selection and the surrounding processes, whose motions continue underneath the 'illusion' of ideology. The expression 'illusion of reality' thus risks

misattributing Martin's outlook to other, quite different schools of thought.

However, despite these minor criticisms, the book remains a much-needed, well-written, and well-substantiated work. The author manages to challenge some of the most common assumptions in the field of conflict studies. More than one reader will find very controversial Martin's claim that, to all effects and purposes, ideologies and religions are only illusions and thus cannot effectively cause anything, let alone war, and it is almost certain that this book will spark a number of debates within the relevant disciplines. Such debates, however, are anything but useless. Martin's great merit is to allow the advances of the cognitive sciences full entrance into the study of war. What's more, he compounds this successful attempt with a courageous argument and with his personal experience as an active officer with first-hand experience in a war zone. The several objections that his critics may address to him will not be able to deny the importance of a book that is a first, essential step into a more scientifically grounded social science and a challenge to several well-established academic theories.

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