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REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

VIOLENCE IS SOCIAL

SINIŠA MALEŠEVIĆ, *WHY HUMANS FIGHT: THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF CLOSE-RANGE VIOLENCE*, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, 2022.

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Siniša Malešević, born in Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and a Full Professor and Chair of Sociology at the University College in Dublin (Ireland), is one of the world's most prominent sociologists of ethnic violence and war. He is also one the key figures and the most relevant scholars of ethnicity and nationalism in contemporary sociology and social science in general. For Malešević, the ultimate causes of organised and/or collective violence largely lie in the sociohistorical or macro phenomena, such as the rise of the state and the bureaucratisation of coercion, along with the accompanying social ideologies such as nationalism (e.g., in his seminal books *The Sociology of War and Violence*, 2010, *The Rise of Organised Brutality*, 2017, and others).

However, in his new book *Why Humans Fight: The Social Dynamics of Close-Range Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), Malešević shifted his "sociological eye" to the micro phenomena and the human emotions regarding close-range fighting. How and why exactly do people engage in direct violence? "War, huh, what is it good for?" and "What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding?" after all? Indeed, why do humans fight face-to-face? And how does it feel? Arguing that fighting is not an individual (or an "anti-social"), but a truly social phenomenon, the answers to these and other age-old questions can be found in this groundbreaking and remarkable treatise by professor Malešević. Furthermore, he also poses and provides answers to fundamental questions regarding human nature and human societies.

The theoretical part of the book consists of six chapters, while the second, more empirically-oriented, part consists of five chapters. The empirical data was based on interviews with former members or veterans of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), as well as other historical and contemporary sources. In this book, Malešević explores in detail "why and under which social conditions human beings are likely to fight, injure, or kill other human beings in combat situations". Combining Durkheim with historical sociology, he also thoroughly analyses "the role of biology, economic

motivations, ideological commitments, coercive pressure, and the emotional bonds of micro-solidarity".

Viewing many of the dominant paradigms and popular explanations of violence as overly simplistic and reductionist, Malešević calls for a genuinely *sociological* analysis "of the combat zone, and of the role organisational power plays in the development of group cohesion". He also explores "the role that emotions play in people's willingness to fight and especially how shared emotional dynamics shape the experience of killing in violent conflicts", arguing that human emotions are not private or passive states (one's "passions"), but active and social phenomena as well. In that sense, Malešević's deliberately essentialist question, "why humans fight?" provides important non-essentialist answers and causal explanations in the fields of historical sociology, sociology of emotions, and theoretical sociology in general.

Malešević's book also exposes many myths concerning human close-range fighting in religion, history, media, and popular culture. Countless depictions of such violence throughout history were pure fiction, and the means of propaganda by one's rulers and/or faith. Humans are predominantly fearful creatures that avoid direct violence, which is also indicated in the morphology of our bodies. Humans lack sharp teeth, claws and the like, implying the comparative absence of direct violence in human natural history or evolution. Similarly, the so-called martial arts must be learned and perfected over many years (i.e. they do not come "naturally" to humans). In his microsociology, Randall Collins (*Violence*, 2008) also argues that human close-range violence is, in fact, "ugly" and "incompetent".

On the other hand, close-range violence between individuals surely exists – in wartime killings and genocides, mafia hits, pub brawls, cases of domestic violence, school shootings, etc. As such, close-range violence represents a major sociological conundrum, which has largely not been addressed by mainstream sociology. So far, violence was analysed in a mostly reductionist manner in sociobiological theories, rational choice theories, theories of psychological motivation or personalities, etc. However, social fights are a primary ("formal") sociological phenomenon, which was articulated even by Simmel in the 1900s and Coser in the 1950s. For Malešević as well, "fighting as a form of violent conflict involves deep social interaction" and "the individuals involved in a fight develop emotional and cognitive reactions, and as such establish interaction with their opponents. Thus, fighting entails active sociation".

In this sense, Siniša Malešević introduces the concept of *social pugnacity* into theoretical sociology (of violence) in order to capture "the relational, changeable, and collective character of close-range fighting". For him, social pugnacity is "not an individual attribute, it is not a product of one's biology or psychology, but a phenomenon generated by the contextual interplay between structure and agency". His book can then also be read as seminal in overcoming the dichotomy between structure and action (agency) in sociology, which is an issue that sociologists from Weber, to Parsons and Goffman, and up to Alexander, Giddens, Coleman, Scheff, Archer etc. have problematised. By exploring close-range violence in detail, Malešević brilliantly showed the pathways for overcoming this conceptual (and also real-world) problem.

Thus, Malešević simultaneously points to possibilities for resolving several epistemological and methodological dilemmas which have burdened sociology in the 20th century. Although his focus is on the microsociology of violence, he integrates macro and micro levels of analysis with a certain ease.

Furthermore, his genre of sociology pays close attention to emotional and cognitive aspects of face-to-face conflicts, but also places these conflicts within the wider macro-historical processes and contexts – and this is probably its greatest scientific value. Finally, the epistemological issue of sociology's uneasy relation towards life sciences is skilfully addressed. The research and theory of Malešević include carefully selected discoveries from evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and psychology, but with a critical distance from (their) reductionism or triviality. Malešević bravely demonstrates how human violence *lacks* a biological, psychological, or economic essence, being socio-culturally and socio-historically variable instead.

In relation to this, the widely popular yet theoretically and empirically problematic book by Steven Pinker on the decline of violence in human history (*The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 2011), finally gets its sociological critique, although this was not Malešević's primary intention. While Pinker and like-minded scholars (e.g. Jared Diamond, Napoleon Chagnon, Lawrence Keeley) claimed that the state, due to its monopoly in the use of force, has led to a reduction of violence among humans, Malešević demonstrated how social pugnacity actually *increases* with the rise of the state's organisational capacities. This is yet another counterintuitive and debunking message of his book.

In a similar contrast to Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil", chapter 10 of Malešević's book deals with the very act of killing in war. Perpetrating murder or close-range violence (chapter 9) is never "banal", nor hygienically clean, with human emotions playing a crucial role in the process. This was also argued in *The Geometry of Genocide* by the sociologist Bradley Campbell (2015). As Malešević highlights, human emotions in close-range fighting are far from uniform or instinctive, including fear and boredom in warfare, but also anger, pride, shame and regret (and the Goffmanian "face-work" in social interaction). Thus, individual emotions regarding violence are (inter)active, historically variable, and culturally flexible, which is an exceptional finding by Malešević.

For Malešević in *Grounded Nationalisms* (2019), nationalism is not an epiphenomenon, an evolutionary vestige of primordial tribalism, nor the Einsteinian "infantile disease" ("measles of mankind"). It is a social fact *par excellence* and the most potent operational ideological discourse in the modern era. Contemporary globalisation and nationalism thus go hand by hand. However, his research of the IRA and the VRS veterans indicates that they were not motivated by nationalism to engage in combat. Rather, micro-solidarity played a significant role, although the macro-ideology of nationalism was a crucial factor in legitimising one's violence. Humans engage in close-range violence by fighting "for others", and not for themselves. They fight for their (imagined) tribe, kinship, or pseudo-kinship, which can be arguably explained by human evolution and by the legitimising ideologies. But also, they fight for their real-world "brothers in arms", which can be explained by microsociology and social emotions.

Malešević's book also represents a bold defence of sociology as a scientific discipline. It stands as an exemplar of Émile Durkheim's maxim from *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), which asserts that social facts must be explained by other social facts. Durkheim articulated this "rule" in order to establish an entirely new academic discipline by "discovering" the unexplored realm of "social facts". With Malešević, we discover why Durkheim was ultimately right – the social fact of interpersonal violence can (and must) be

adequately explained by various macro and micro social facts. Simmel also requested a distinct epistemological niche for sociology, and identified it in the forms of sociality. Social conflict is one of these forms, which then requires qualitatively different explanations, or explanations from a distinct science (of sociology). It is a non-obvious fact that conflict is actually a *social*, and not an "anti-social" act, as portrayed by the media and perceived in the popular imagination.

The arguments in this book do not imply that human evolution, cognition, or one's rational choice, are irrelevant. Still, it reminds us of the striking fact that "no other vertebrate animal is capable of killing 75 million members of its own species in six years". Thus, it is required to "turn the neo-Darwinian argument on its head" and show that human violence is a "distinctly unique evolutionary development". Even close-range violence is fundamentally a social, and not an individual act, which is the core tenet of Malešević's work. It is primarily a *sociology* of violence, and not sociology of *violence* (*per se*).

With *Why Humans Fight*, we finally come to understand that social fighting is a *sui generis* phenomenon that cannot be reduced to human biology (aggression, personality) or individual (cognitive, rational, economic) motivations, which are isolated from a broader sociohistorical context. Evolutionary explanations, concerning the territoriality or aggressiveness of human animals in terms of survival (e.g., by Konrad Lorenz or Edward O. Wilson) are exposed as relatively simplistic and trivial. Since, "unlike wolves or tigers that have to face their prey and kill to eat, humans rely on coercive organisations, technological superiority, and normative justification to inflict violence".

The viewpoints about violence in personality psychology ("violent personality", "antisocial personality" etc.) are exposed as equally superficial and circular arguments. Contrary to the famous, but dubious experiments by Milgram or Zimbardo, Malešević argues that violence primarily operates under structural coercion (imposed by the states, religions and education), and not at the individual level in terms of the innate human aggressiveness or one's personality traits. Although "human beings are material creatures defined by their bodies and minds", social organisations that actually fight wars and commit genocides, such as states, "do not possess brains". While the best recruits for close-range violence in warfare are not impulsively aggressive, but "self-disciplined and obedient individuals". Thus, "human relations are not defined by fixed biological, psychological, or other characteristics, but are created through the interactions of specific social organisations, ideological frames, and micro-interactional processes", as Malešević carefully proclaims and explains.

Alongside the many inspiring insights drawn from empirical evidence, this book also serves as a bold defence of theoretical sociology and its cumulative knowledge. This should not come as a surprise, since Malešević is an expert in sociological theory, and an (co) author of two recent books on classical and contemporary sociological theories published by SAGE (2021). On the other hand, *Why Humans Fight* can be read as a "microsociological turn" by this scholar, who (now) argues that neither social structure, culture, ideology nor history can fully explain social pugnacity. With regard to human violence, we must also turn to human emotions, human minds, and mundane encounters in everyday life as well.

In a personal conversation with Siniša in Novi Sad, I have asked him about the academic challenges regarding his mode of sociological research and inquiry. Especially about his wide-ranging

("grand") theorising, standing in stark contrast to the prevailing extreme specialisation and empty empiricism. With a characteristic smile, he responded: "As a sociologist, I only desire to understand certain broad phenomena, and to explain these to myself. As such, the title of my next book will be simply: why humans fight?". He noted the same interest in its Acknowledgements section: "On a more personal level, this book is also an attempt to understand how and why"; specifically, how and why many individuals participated in the bloodshed in former Yugoslavia – or refused to do so. Sociological theory and research lack more of this spirit of curiosity, and posing fundamental philosophical and societal questions.

Some biosocially oriented sociologists such as Jonathan H. Turner have long proclaimed that "Sociology is now big, disorganized, incoherent, and increasingly boring" ("The disintegration of American sociology", 1989). And, Randall Collins rightfully claimed that "Being a sociologist means never having to be bored" ("The sociological eye and its blinders", 1998). This theoretical "crisis", "incoherence", or "chaos" has gradually led to the marginalisation and creeping irrelevance of sociology, at least compared to psychology, economics, and even political science. In this book, Malešević reinvigorates the excitement in sociology by formulating sensible, sound and interesting theoretical principles which explain general phenomena regarding human existence.

In the end, as a particularly poignant moment, the author dedicated his book named "Why Humans Fight?", and released by a distinguished international publisher, to "family members and friends who were displaced by the 1990s wars of Yugoslav succession and are now scattered all over the world". We owe gratitude to Siniša Malešević for this important and remarkable book as a global community of sociologists. But also as individuals who were regionally and personally affected by the mentioned wars and violence, and their aftermath in our post-Yugoslav societies.