

Review

Joshua S Goldstein (2001) *War and Gender*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Themبisa Waetjen

Although the phenomenon of human aggression has always been offered in support of claims made by socio-biology, it is odd that the current, deeply disturbing scale of superpower belligerence appears to have invigorated biological explanations for warfare. According to one report, 'a growing number of anthropologists and biologists [have concluded] that war is not a product of civilisation – of nations and economies and boundary lines – but has somehow been hardwired into the brain, humanity's most potent weapon for good and evil' (*Sunday Independent* March 3, 2003). Such discussions reflect enduring 17th century philosophical uncertainties regarding human nature, epitomised in the rival positions of Hobbes and Rousseau, and it appears that these debates are alive and well in mainstream political science in the United States. More recently, a compounding issue – the problem of gender – has come under scrutiny. Why is war a visibly *masculinist* enterprise?

The gender division of labour that organises warfare – ie, that relegates direct combat and killing overwhelmingly to the agency of men and that mobilises women to an array of 'supportive' and 'civilian' roles – appears to be cross cultural and transhistorical. How can the consistency of this gender pattern be explained? As the wide-ranging volume *War and Gender* demonstrates, answers to these questions are forthcoming from disciplines in the biological and social sciences. Joshua Goldstein sets out to evaluate the evidence articulated by several schools of thought 'in the context of the overall [multi-disciplinary] picture' (2001: 1). While this useful endeavour produces an engaging and clearly written review of some diverse literatures, the book is ultimately weighed down by the author's ambition definitively to test all possible hypotheses and to derive conclusive answers from the sum of the various disciplinary parts. Along the way, it almost entirely

avoids engagement with critical theory and research, choosing instead to treat both war and gender as human universals that are subject to the influence of positivistic variables. Critical readers will likely find its conclusions somewhat arbitrary, even trivial.

War and Gender is organised to examine six prominent explanations for the consistency of gender roles in war. These include the influences of biological differences in anatomy and physiology (including genetics, testosterone levels, cognition and sex hormones), behavioural sex differences (in group dynamics, hierarchy, and bonding) and cultural influences such as gender socialisation, the feminisation of enemies, and men's sexual and economic social dominance. Goldstein chooses to consider these variables as formal hypotheses, each addressed in a separate, robust chapter that discusses aspects of the major claims and research findings.

Chapter One tests the core assertion of the book to determine whether, indeed, gender roles in war are cross-culturally and historically consistent. He demonstrates convincingly that despite a minute number of cases that tend to be inflated and overused as anecdotal evidence to argue the contrary, gender norms in war are astonishingly invariable. His assessment of the data indicates that accounts of societies in which women have constituted the military majority (eg Amazon matriarchies) are, in fact, well-circulated myths or cases that have become greatly exaggerated. Substantiated instances in which women were organised for combat in all-women units, such as the Dahomey in 18th and 19th century, present-day Benin, or the bomber squadrons of the Soviet Union in the Second World War, stand out as exceptional cases – and, indeed, serve to demonstrate the general rules of gender normativity, since such units never composed more than about eight to 12 per cent of a state's total combat forces.

Still, as Goldstein is quick to point out, women have engaged as combatants in all-women units, in mixed units, and as individuals (both openly and disguised as men) in all-male units, in hundreds of documented circumstances. The rich and numerous cases he highlights make for a fascinating second chapter. Goldstein investigates the historical record to determine whether women perhaps have simply unequivocally failed to make good soldiers – a possibility that would preclude the need for further explanation of why men dominate soldiering. Yet he discovers, on the contrary, that women (when they have fought in wars) have successfully demonstrated martial prowess on the battlefield. When women have participated they have added to, not detracted from, the military power of

a state or social group, showing a capacity not only to risk death and injury, but also to wound and kill identified enemies. Indeed, it is the documented *success* of women in combat that redoubles the puzzle of gendered war.

Yet, perhaps cases of women warriors are proportionately few because fewer women than men are biologically predisposed towards the demands of fighting. This possibility is considered in Chapters Three and Four. Chapter Three ascertains the existence of sex differences in relation to aggression, to physical strength and to certain cognitive abilities. The first task is to ascertain whether any significant differences are attributable to sex per se; the second, to determine whether such differences can be considered a strong explanatory factor for gendered warfare. The commonly held idea that testosterone causes aggression is shown to have almost no empirical support, and the idea of a separate genetic code for men – an ‘aggression gene’ on the Y chromosome – turns out to be simply wrong. Size and strength, which are relevant to particular feats (such as carrying a particularly large wounded comrade from the battlefield) offer a more plausible argument for a pragmatic preference of men for men in modern warfare – given that only a sizeable minority of women are bigger and stronger than a sizeable minority of men. Still, these factors are unconvincing as explanations, and Goldstein’s discussion has the effect of showing the limits of physiological variables as causes for gendered war.

Discussions about aggression and, in Chapter Four, about the possibility of innate gender propensities for certain activities – such as group bonding or working within hierarchies – raise questions about how war is to be defined. Goldstein’s definition of war as ‘lethal inter-group violence’ is extremely broad. Yet, it becomes quickly clear that most of the available research on warfare is weighted towards conflicts between modern industrial nation-states, and that – even within these conflicts – guerrilla armies, revolutionary wars and genocides are generally portrayed by Goldstein as outlier cases, cases that stand in contrast to patterns of ‘conventional’ war. Moreover, while political conflict in ‘simple societies’ (Goldstein’s term for pre-capitalist or pre-modern societies) are assessed, they can hardly be brought usefully to bear on the questions that are being posed – questions, for example, such as whether men more than women function better in a bureaucratic military hierarchy or why men experience diminished sexual vigour ‘in the trenches’ and ‘at the front’. Since such questions clearly relate to historically specific modes of warfare, it would be better for the author to acknowledge the difficulties of conceptualising (let alone

explaining) war as a 'human universal' within his study. Yet, Goldstein, appears too driven by the design of his project and cannot seriously comment on the historically situated nature of war, nor the organisational and technological transformations of war over time and space.

This maddening lack of historicity and context affects the book in other ways. Early on, in his effort to establish the universality of war, Goldstein makes some preposterous social comparisons – leaps that are only possible because of a complete denial of social complexity. His intention, justifiably, is to challenge certain myths about celebrated 'peaceful' societies. Yet, rather than rejecting the use of totalising adjectives to encapsulate the character of a 'people' (or, indeed, to problematise conceptions of 'peoplehood' that can be easily characterised in the first place) Goldstein searches for evidence to reveal that so-called 'peaceful' societies, ones that do not engage in full-blown wars, may yet be 'warlike'. Witness the case of the !Kung, who, according to one 1916 report (the political burden associated with colonial anthropology is not even mentioned) 'warred frequently with neighbouring peoples until the European colonists arrived, only then becoming more peaceful' (2001:28).

Goldstein then quotes an account of a !Kung raid in which '(w)omen frantically seized their children and tried to flee, but were slaughtered without compunction. Here a mother nearly managed to escape with her baby, but ... a few blows with a kiri smashed the child's skull and finished off the mother, too. Only a few lucky ones managed to get away... The victors ... started looting. Everything useful was taken away. Clay pots were smashed and huts set on fire' (2001:28). Goldstein's conclusion from this account reveals his fierce determination to level human groups to a brutal common denominator. 'If this is a peaceful society,' he remarks, 'perhaps Bosnia in 1992 would fit that category as well!'

Chapters Five and Six explore cultural and sociological explanations for gendered warfare. Yet, even here, there is no discussion of how systems of production, exchange, or political rule affect gender relations or the relations of violence. In these accounts, war is presented as something 'cultures' or 'societies' do to men (and to women) in order to fulfil the functional needs of group protection or group aggression. Because war is essentially a traumatic reality, boys are emotionally 'toughened' through a variety of socialisation vehicles (war play, sports, TV, video games, etc) in order to prepare them for combat. While clinical pathologies such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder indicate that war does not come naturally

to men, cultures construct masculinity in association with traits required in war (aggressiveness, emotional suppression and social dominance) so that combat becomes a 'test of manhood'. Causal directions are quite opaque here. Moreover, in these accounts, men appear to have little agency or power in shaping the society that delegates these roles, and seem also to have little relational power over women.

The product of a McArthur Foundation grant, this book provides a well-written review of several research literatures, confidently guiding the reader through the vocabularies, methodologies, and empirical case studies associated with different approaches. Yet it notably excludes the critical perspectives emerging from history and sociology. Moreover, though Goldstein recognises what is at stake for feminist theory in questions about the relationship between masculinity and violence (he includes a brief summary of feminist perspectives at the outset), the book is not set within any larger historical understanding of patriarchal power and social relations. Rather, it overwhelmingly favours functionalist perspectives within the social science disciplines. Material that is soundly non-academic (for example, Robert Bly and his mytho-poetic Men's Movement perspective) receives attention that is surely unmerited, given the silence on more central scholarly views. In particular, it seems indefensible that a 400-plus page book on gender and political violence could omit any serious critical discussion of the state, of nationalism, or the material histories of patriarchy and property relations associated with political power.

Goldstein asserts that the best explanation of gendered war roles comes down to the compounding influence of two variables: 1: small, innate biological gender differences in average size, strength and roughness of play, and 2: cultural moulding of tough, brave men, who feminise their enemies to encode domination (2001:401). How helpful (and how valid) can such a conclusion be? More convincingly, the book helps to destabilise several well-circulated ideas about the causal influence of sex hormones and genetics over peaceful or aggressive behaviours. Men are not biologically programmed to be more warlike than women; and while some women oppose wars, most women support them.

Goldstein's remaining discussion is rushed and unsophisticated. After advocating for an alternative method of raising boys – expressed in the most facile and instrumentalist way imaginable – he moves on to compare the global, interstate system to a group of individuals trying to get along peacefully. Within this framework, symbolic, reconciliatory handshakes

between state leaders are compared to those found among apes in the wild. Such musings detract from the book's worthy sections and only served to underscore the limitations of a positivist approach to an historically complex question.