

Journal of
Economic and Social Thought

www.kspjournals.org

Volume 6

June 2019

Issue 2

Theories and the reasons for war: A survey

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Abstract. War or conflict is an activity of aggression and violence with weapons and new technologies for resolving internal and/or international disputes between two or more nations, between organized ethnic, social and religious groups, etc., for the purpose of reducing the freedom of other societies/groups and causing social, economic, cultural or ethnic damages over time. The theories of the causes of wars can be distinguished in historical and modern theories. In general, a general theory of the causes of war is difficult to create because of manifold factors engaged in triggering conflicts over time and space. This study describes some theories that focus on specific factors generating a socioeconomic disequilibrium between nations and different populations that can lead to war.

Keywords. Conflict, Struggle, Disputes, War.

JEL. O32, O33.

1. Introduction

Scholars of different disciplines have investigated what causes war with different theories based on approaches from philosophy, history, psychology, economics, demography, sociology, biology, etc. (Ackoff & Rovin, 2003; Levy, 2011). In particular, the theories of the causes of wars can be distinguished in historical and modern theories (Figure 1).

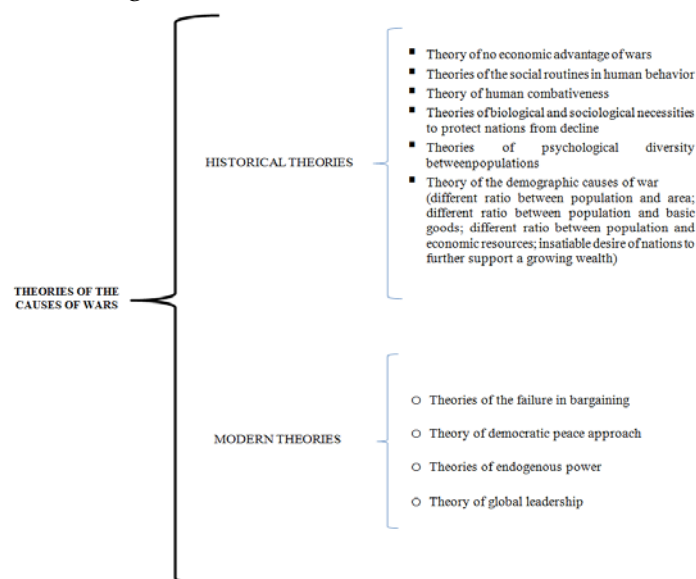


Figure 1. Theories of the causes of wars

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2. Historical theories of the causes of war

A general theory of the causes of war is difficult to create because of manifold factors engaged in triggering conflicts over time and space. This section describes some historical theories that focus on specific factors generating a socioeconomic disequilibrium between nations and different populations that can lead to war.

The theory of no economic advantage of wars by Norman Angell

One of the theories about causes and effects of wars in society is by Norman Angell (1911). The thesis of this lecturer, journalist, politician and Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1933 is that war does not generate any economic advantage for winners. The proof of this interesting theory is based on different points as follows.

- When winners of wars destroy enemy populations or seize their wealth, they damage themselves because they destroy the commercial opportunities.
- If winners impose fiscal clauses on losers also limit commercial opportunities for themselves, generating damages both for winners and losers.
- If winners decide not to impose on losers customs restrictions but a policy of free exchange in commerce, winners have benefits, but at the same time losers have high economic advantages that can be used to support physical and human capital and a potential revenge, creating for winners a continuous source of troubles.
- If winners impose a war allowance, it can increase government debt that can be supported creating new currency which increases prices without increasing wealth (inflation), generating a variable unit of measure of currency in commercial negotiations.
- If winners annex the territories of losers, they generate a simple change of public governance and administration, and a source of potential socioeconomic issues in the future.
- If winners transform territories of losers in colonies, they do not have any advantage because colonies can be sources of rebellion, internal wars, increasing public expense for winners to maintain social and political stability.

In short, the utilization of military force for resolving disputes between states and/or groups does not generate any economic advantage. This thesis by Angell has been confuted by some scholars, such as the prof. of Glasgow University I. H. Jones in 1915 and prof. of the Sapienza University of Rome Corrado Gini (1921). However, today this approach by Norman Angell can be true because humankind and geoeconomic areas have societies more and more inter-related, forming a world system with indissoluble economic interrelationships among different states based on development of bank systems, and communication and information technologies. Hence, conflicts between countries and/or different societies that are elements of the same system can create only mutual damages. When all populations will know the uselessness of wars, the optimistic prediction by Angell (1911) is that wars may disappear, such as religion

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wars. Unfortunately, from 1910s, when Angell (1911) wrote his book, called *The Great Illusion*, many wars have been occurred and in the future other wars can occur and recur between nations that seem to be irrational actors in the presence of environmental tensions and threats.

The theory of wars based on historical causes by James Novicow

This theory explains war with historical causes. James Novicow, a sociologist of pacifist theory, in 1894 argued that wars persist and repeat because of historical causes that generate an inertia force in society. This theory simply states that current and future causes of wars are due to an individual and social routine of human behavior, though wars do not generate any advantage for winners and losers. This theory is, of course, a simple explanation of the reasons of war with weak empirical foundations.

The theory of natural human combativeness by Nietzsche and other theorists

Another theory, that Novicow rejects, is based on natural human combativeness. This theoretical framework is claimed by many theorists of war, such as Nietzsche, Gumplovics, Ratzenhofer, Steimnetz, Mahan, etc. Although some policymakers and governments recommend pacifistic approaches, there are instincts rooted in human nature that lead to wars and conflicts between organized groups for manifold factors. However, economic interests seem to overpower the instincts of combativeness in society, such that this theory has many contradictions.

The theory of biological and sociological necessities to protect nations from decline

The difference between the theory of human combativeness and teleological theory of war to safeguard some nations from decline is that the first theory considers human combativeness as a cause of war, the second one it considers human combativeness as effects of war. In short, this theory, supported by many scholars, argues that struggles and conflicts are due to natural agents given by high growth rate of population that increases the density of some regions generating social tensions and factors associated with aggression of human behavior (cf., Gini, 1921).

The theory of psychological diversity between populations

Another theory suggests that the causes of war are due to psychological diversity of populations in regions and/or macro regions. These possible reasons of war create intergroup hostility between different societies that have common identities based on religious and cultural traditions (cf., Choma *et al.*, 2016; van Bergen *et al.*, 2015). These causes are necessary but not sufficient conditions for wars because the diversity between populations are permanent factors, whereas conflicts are intermittent events in society over time and space. Moreover, these causes tend to be lower over time because of the reduction of heterogeneity between nations for high mobility of people generated by faster communication and transportation means, and higher intellectual contacts.

The theory of demographic causes of war by Gini and other scholars

This theory argues that population of states with a high density tends to pour out in nations with scarce population. The high demographic pressure

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of a nation on another nation is due to a different ratio between level of population and spatial area. This theory explains past wars between Germany against France that had a national surface similar to Germany but with a lower population and a lower fertility. In this theory, some scholars claim that the demographic pressure of a nation on another one is due to a different ratio between population and economic resources. In this context, Robert Malthus considered wars as a repressive factor of the disequilibrium between population and basic goods. Some scholars support the arguments of this theory that the expansion of a population can be due to scarce essentials or other natural and economic factors. In short, the theory of demographic causes of wars are due to a high demographic pressure generated by nations having a different ratio between population and wealth (economic resources). In fact, according to this theory, the high demographic pressure generating war is due to a disequilibrium between populations of two nations, shortage that one nation has in basic goods, a low economic growth in comparison with population, and/or also an insatiable desire of some societies of further supporting a growing national income. Overall, then, the positive correlation between high population density and violent behavior leading to war can be explained with the association between high density of people and poverty in some regions. In other words, high density of population and the unbalanced growth of economic resources negatively influence social relations and lead to deteriorated human functioning that in specific geoeconomic zones may contribute to support violence and war (Altman, 1975; Baum & Paulus, 1991; Lepore *et al.*, 1991). In order to synthesize a general theory of the causes of war, Gini (1921) states that wars or conflicts with weapons between peoples or between social classes are due to exasperation in all or some social classes, to human combativeness in the presence of obstacles that psychic diversity between populations oppose to the tendency of the various social elements to distribute themselves according to their natural expansion force.

3. Modern theories of the reasons for war

Theories of the failure in bargaining

Jackson & Morelli (2011) suggest two prerequisites for a war between rational actors: firstly, the costs of war cannot be overwhelmingly high, i.e. wars occur with rational actors if the gains from the conflict will outweigh the costs incurred. Secondly, there has to be a failure in bargaining (cf., Fearon, 1995). Thus, to explain how wars may occur, it is important to understand bargaining failures given by different factors:

- Asymmetric information about the potential costs and benefits of war;
- A lack of ability to enforce a bargaining agreement and/or a lack of the ability to credibly commit to abide by an agreement;
- Indivisibilities of resources that might change hands in a war, so that not all potentially mutually beneficial bargaining agreements are feasible;

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- Agency problems, where the incentives of leaders differ from those of the populations that they represent;
- Multilateral interactions where every potential agreement is blocked by some coalition of states or constituencies who can derail it.

In general, modern approaches argue that some causes of war are due to some level of irrationality of actors (Jackson & Morelli, 2011). Religion, according to these approaches can be a cause of war between nations. The goal might be to increase the size of population of one religion or eradicate another. In such situations, even with full commitment and bargaining opportunities, there might be no agreement that appeases an aggressor. That is, even if agreements are available and fully enforceable, agents are driven by a specific goal that may be incompatible with the well-being or autonomy of another population. Revenge is another reason for war within the set of non-rationalist explanations of war. Another reason of war is to rationalize the incentives to eliminate another ethnic group or minority ideological group by a desire to obtain a higher social power in current and/or future period (cf., Esteban & Ray, 2008).

Theory of the democratic peace

The theoretical framework of democratic peace states that democracies rarely go to war.

Scholars argue that democratic societies are averse to war because of the nature of democratic culture and also because citizens will not vote to send themselves off to war. Moreover, the norms of peaceful resolution of disputes within democracies are extended to interactions with other democracies. Fearon (2011) rationalizes democratic peace arguing that: “the stronger country between two potential contenders usually has a higher GDP [Gross Domestic Product] per capita. If it is democratic, then, even if the leader promises to a set of supporters some benefits from the war, it cannot avoid the possibility that eventually, once democratic rules apply to the unified country in case of victory, the GDP per capita of the winning country will go down. Hence voters of a richer democracy who believe that the unified country will lead to wealth redistribution should be against the war, and hence only weak contenders should remain interested in wars. However, weaker countries will generally have less interest in entering a conflict to begin with due to a low probability of success” (as quoted by Jackson & Morelli, 2011; cf., Levy, 2011).

Theories of endogenous power

Some theories explain the incentives of countries to arm and create wars. As a matter of fact, the probability of war depends on prior investments in arms, and incentives to arm depend on how arms affect future incentives to go to war or to bargain. In short, decisions to go to war depend on endogenous armament environment in which they reside (endogenous power, see Jackson & Morelli, 2011). Peaceful outcomes are not necessarily the efficient ones in the presence of endogenous-arms settings. Arms are wasteful, and long periods of peace with costly armament levels can be worse than having an early conflict and then thereafter living in a unified

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country with peace without the need for arms. A peace agreement only becomes attainable after the balance of power has shifted, such that there is an interest in both sides to agree to peace. However, this process can take a long run.

The theory of global leadership

Superpowers are nations with a high economic-war potential and the ability and expertise to influence other geoeconomic regions (Coccia, 2019). Superpowers have a purpose to achieve/sustain a global leadership and they can develop conflicts to cope with environmental threats or to take advantage of important opportunities. Put differently, superpowers, winning international conflicts, can achieve and/or sustain a global leadership in world economy to take advantage of important opportunities (Coccia, 2015, p. 203). Linstone (2007, p.115) states that: “the winner in each case became the leading global power, a new global political economy emerged, and democracy advanced” (cf., Devezas, 2006; Linstone, 2007a). In fact, world is increasingly global, complex, turbulent, rich, interconnected and multilevel; the only feasible strategy of superpowers with conflict development is to achieve/sustain a global leadership in world economy that is subsequently sustained with an economic and technological superiority in comparison with other competitive nations (cf., Modelski, 2010, p.1419ff). The conflict development by superpowers appears to be necessary phases for human development, which is not a monotonous and linear but rather a disequilibrium process of the dynamics of world system (cf., Gini, 1921). The conflict development by superpowers can be also due to prove military and scientific superiority towards other belligerent nations to maintain the status quo of current leadership and social power in the international system. In particular, conflict development of superpower generates demand- and supply-side shocks for domestic economy and for economies of allied countries. In fact, conflict can establish main technological, economic and infrastructural preconditions for an “age of high mass consumption” (Rostow, 1959, pp.11-13). The effects of military conflicts support output, productivity and technological growth of superpowers and inter-related countries (cf., Ruttan, 2006). For instance, Wright (1997, p.1565) examines the “American technological leadership” and shows that manufacturing sectors for U.S. economy have taken advantage from fruitful demand- and supply-side effects of conflicts. Superpowers, developing conflicts, support R&D investments to produce military technologies that are transferred to civilian applications in the long term generating new patterns of economic growth. In short, the mobilization of human and economic resources by superpowers for conflict development increases the rates of inventions and technological innovations that in the post-war period are diffused to support productivity and long-run economic growth (Stein & Russett, 1980, p.412;

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Coccia, 2015, 2017, 2018)¹. In this theory, the conflict development of some countries can be also due to change the hierarchy of power between nations in the international system and generate a new distribution of power at international level (cf. Levy, 1983; 2011). Modelski (1972, p.48) asserts that the “war causes the Great Powers”, such as Roman Empire over 200BC~400AD, Britain Empire in the 1710-1850 period, the USA from 1940s onwards, etc. (Stein & Russett, 1980). However, super powers may assume a worldwide role close to autocracy in order to sustain the global leadership with a behavior prone to a permanent “wartime” and strains in different geoeconomic regions (Linstone, 2007, p.237). Overall, then, this theory by Coccia (2015) argues that nations, with a high economic potential, develop conflict for the goal to achieve/sustain a position of global leadership and increase the social power in the international system to take advantage of important economic opportunities over time.

4. Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the causes of war, affected by manifold factors, is a non-trivial exercise. Wars are associated with human activity and human nature in order to take advantage of important opportunities, to cope with and/or adapt to environmental threats and/or changing contexts. Overall, then, wars are due to instability of economic, social, demographic, ethnic, anthropological, religious and perhaps biological factors of human society. Finally, sources of wars are mainly linked to the question of what human beings truly need and how they seek to satisfy needs, solve social issues and adapt to changing contexts and environmental threats in society.

¹For studies about measurement of technology, technological evolution and sources of technology, cf., Calabrese *et al.*, 2005; Coccia, 2003, 2005, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006, 2010, 2010a, 2013, 2013a, 2014, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2015, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2019, 2019a; Coccia & Bozeman, 2016; Coccia & Cadario, 2014; Coccia *et al.*, 2015; Coccia & Rolfo, 2009, 2010, 2013; Coccia & Wang, 2016.

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