

## **Wars for Symbols: Encyclopedia of Trauma 2012 Ed Charles Figley. Sage.**

### ***Introduction***

In this entry we examine symbolic derivatives of three agonistic (aggressive) survival strategies that have the potential to radiate into wars.

The three agonistic survival strategies are hunting/obtaining resources (otherwise called assertiveness or goal achievement), competition/struggle, and defence/fight.

These survival strategies have played out in ever more complex and symbolic ways as civilization became more complex.

Koestler in *The urge to self-destruction* (1974) reasoned that most of the recently evolved (fore)brain that dealt with higher mental functioning grew after birth when infants were susceptible to imprinting of experience and imagination. Humans became susceptible to imaginary creations and magical thinking as well as to confusions of symbols and reality. According to Koestler beliefs in magical symbols explained the unique irrationality of human destructiveness.

Valent (1998a, b) described three-dimensions through which survival strategies, in this case agonistic survival strategies, radiated through the human brain and mind. One dimension (process) included progression of biological, psychological, and social components of survival strategies over time. Another dimension (parameters) included social levels (individual, group, nation). The depth dimension contained the ladder of forebrain evolution. The steps on the ladder were: survival, moral judgements-virtue/guilt, esteem/shame, and fairness/injustice; ideals, values, and principles; dignity, honour, and rights; myths, religion, and ideology; awe, sacredness, and place in the universe; identity, existential meanings, and purpose. Valent describes these steps on the evolutionary ladder in *From Survival to Fulfilment; A Framework for the Life-Trauma Dialectic* in what he calls the Depth Axis pp 87-99. Breakdown on any rung could be perceived as a threat to the whole ladder.

The emotional/experiential and cognitive/intellectual valences of survival strategy radiations, Valent contended, resided respectively in the right and left hemispheres of the brain. The right hemisphere was the non-verbal, non-thinking, timeless, self-unaware half of the brain. The left hemisphere, that is, the verbal, thinking, self-aware part of the brain, translated right brain feelings into left brain words and symbols.

The latter may be complex. For instance a sense of natural justice may be translated into codes of law, a need for existential meaning into bibles and philosophies. However at times of stress and trauma survival strategies and right brain functioning intensify and simple symbols like flags, anthems, crosses, or just words like Motherland, democracy, communism, can represent a whole ladder of meanings and purpose. At such times too, return to dependence and vulnerability to brainwashing and magical thinking increase. So does group formation and cohesion of the group through symbols.

Over time, symbols may have varying and fluctuating connections to their right brain sources. For instance a leader may be seen variably as a god to die for or a fallible human. An object may be perceived variably as having sacred and magical properties, or being just metal or wood. When the war is over, one is left to wonder at the folly of

previous right brain dominance. “They were different times, a different world,” people say.

Because it is hard for us to access our right brains, our self-understanding of our emotional/experiential roots and traumatic snags lags far behind our instincts and the symbols that evoke them. The following is an attempt to verbalise some of the ways that agonistic survival strategies interact with symbols and contribute to the causes of war.

### ***Symbols of Hunt/Obtaining Resources.***

Hunting concepts have always permeated wars. Alexander the Great for instance consciously used hunting tactics in his wars. As well, to this day combat units share features of hunting units. They are similar in numbers, organization, feelings of unity, loyalty, and tactics. They still “hunt down” enemies.

Seeing enemies as animals makes them huntable. Such perceptions have been ubiquitous from primitive societies to this day. For instance Hitler clearly pronounced his enemies to be subhuman.

The flesh of animals that provided life and energy has been symbolized in territory, resources, oil, and trade routes that delivered the resources. Appropriation of these symbols and making them part of one’s own or one’s nation’s body symbolized the process of hunting.

Hunting was projected on to the gods too. Disasters were explained as punishment by gods who had to be appeased with food. Sacrifices were often human, especially children. Imagination could run wild. In ancient Egypt and China, when god-kings died, resources accompanied them to the next life. This included not only food, but also wives, concubines, guards, and servants. The Aztecs created wars in order to be able to hunt and sacrifice tens of thousands of captives to the sun in order to provide it with the energy it required each night to battle darkness.

### ***Symbols of Competition/Struggle.***

Violent competition within groups is mitigated by hierarchies that are determined by natural strength or contests. The first hierarchical status of life is lowly helplessness of infants in the face of god-like parents.

God-likeness of parents is transferred in later life to authority figures. They can exact awe and unthinking submission and obedience in their subjects. Authority figures may be symbolized in gods whose divine power is delegated to earthly hierarchies. Whether kings or priests, the heads of such hierarchies have till recently been considered to be demigods or at least to have direct contact with the gods.

Phillip Zimbardo described in *The Lucifer Effect* (2007) his experiment in which he assigned random prisoner and guard roles to university students. The experiment demonstrated an innate tendency in ordinary humans to follow leaders and to obey authority. The surrender of will and conscience can lead to harming others if ordered to do so.

Contests for status moved gradually to status symbols. Initially they were displays of skulls and trophies, later of property- land, animals, serfs, women, and wealth. Greed, envy, and jealousy motivated kings to vie for these symbols even if it meant war. Status symbols became more ephemeral yet just as powerful. Thus kings went to war to make a mark, to achieve respect and prestige, or to retrieve honour if they felt insulted,

denigrated, or humiliated. Hitler saw the Second World War as a means to rectify Germany's humiliation in the First World War.

Symbolisations of self-esteem could interweave the personal and the political in complex ways. For instance Shaka, who founded the Zulu empire, was driven by a need to overcome his humiliation as a product of incest and ridicule in his childhood for having a small penis. Hitler too may have compounded his humiliation as a child with that of Germany.

Scapegoats may become symbols of causes of all that had gone wrong. Misery stemming from lust for power, greed, and corruption by kings and priests may be blamed on outsiders.

Scapegoats may be blamed for all sorts of disasters. Jews were blamed for everything that had gone wrong for Germany. The Holocaust was the result of the blame.

### ***Symbols of Defence/Fight.***

No survival strategy is as prone to symbolisations as this one and more unnecessary deaths and wars have been perpetrated for symbols of defence than for any other reason.

The symbols relate to atavistic predators and enemies and evoke fear. They can be enhanced and compounded by personal experiences of traumatic situations.

One way to allay fear of predators is to act as a predator oneself. Skulls, scalps, and trophies symbolized the capacity and willingness to kill. That was meant to deter potential enemies. An extreme example of display of such power occurred when the 19<sup>th</sup> century King of Dahomey ordered the massacre of thousands of prisoners, mutilation of their genitals and throwing their heads to the population to eat.

Modern displays of power to kill include masses of soldiers marching as one symbolising a single big body, and parades of artillery and nuclear missiles symbolising macho strength and determination. The problem with all these displays is that the other side becomes fearful and aggressive in return. It is pure luck that we have avoided a nuclear holocaust.

With advent of civilisation, more abstract symbols became ever more important to cohere large masses of people. Concepts of tribe, race, nation, and religion, each with myths of common origin, family, existential purpose and destiny became important. Since Napoleon, ideology became a similar abstract power. Yet each concept had to be able to be symbolized in an immediate simple manner. Flags, anthems, crosses, and words such as Catholic, Protestant, German, French came to symbolise complex history, values, group, and need for loyalty and sacrifice.

The earlier "other" came to be applied to larger groups. Suspicion was always latent of those across the border and of those of different racial, ethnic, historical, political, ideological or religious hues.

In times of stress suspicion can give rise to explosion of primitive fears of atavistic predators. For instance Hitler portrayed Jews simultaneously as parasites infesting Germany's body, as predators whose tentacles strangled the world, and as monsters who seduced German women and ate Aryan children.

In addition to earthly monsters imagination created ephemeral monsters: ghosts, witches, magic, evil, and devils that vied for one's body and soul. These elaborations of earlier symbols of predators and enemies were added to the evil attributes of "other"

groups and scapegoats. Fighting them rationalized burning and destroying them among the greatest atrocities in the name of sacred destiny.

Wars for symbols can be especially vicious because their emotional valence, which includes the whole ladder of mental evolution from jungle survival to existential meaning is not available for rational analysis. Hence we have events like the Crusades, the Inquisition, the 30 Year War (1618-1648) between Catholics and Protestants that destroyed the bulk of the German population, and movements of millions of soldiers to kill millions of people whom they do not know thousands of miles away, as Tolstoy observed in *War and Peace* with regard to the Napoleonic wars.

**In conclusion**, the three agonistic survival strategies of hunting, competition and defence reach a super-charged level of destructiveness when symbols take over their tendencies to dehumanise, denigrate, and demonise. Organic survival necessities are lost to ever more irrational derivative perceptions with ever more destructive weapons threatening ever greater populations.

We now live in a potentially resource-full world, in which wars for goods and status are not necessary for our survival, and defensive wars are irrational and dangerous.

We are in a state well known to traumatology: where we reverberate with past traumas that do not apply to our present and where symbols trigger us unwittingly into the past.

As in trauma therapy generally, we need to understand our past threats and traumas and put them into current perspectives. We need to bring survival strategy radiations and symbolizations into awareness. Owning our minds, we can then mould our future histories and narratives.

That is the aim of traumatology.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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