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Benjamin Constant: from the age of war to the age of commerce

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Benjamin Constant was a distinguished liberal thinker whose continuing fame rests on his differentiation between ancient and modern liberty. In making this distinction Constant was attempting to demonstrate that the values which had actuated the ancient Greeks and Romans, and which many of the most extreme players in the French Revolution had attempted to emulate, were no longer relevant in the modern world. For Constant the Revolution had demonstrated that the values of ancient liberty were positively harmful when applied to modern politics. In this Constant was following Montesquieu and his view that 'sweet commerce', as manifested in the regime of eighteenth century England, had created a new type of political order unknown to the ancients. In a nutshell commerce had come to replace war as the power actuating the behaviour of men and women.

It is worthwhile looking closely at what Constant meant by Modern and Ancient liberty. Modern liberty he described as follows:

For each of them it is the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death or maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or more individuals. It is the right of everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practise it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it: to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. It is everyone’s right to associate with other individuals, either to discuss their interests, or to profess the religion which they and their associates prefer, or even simply to occupy their days or hours in a way which is
most compatible with their inclinations or whims. Finally it is
everyone's right to exercise some influence on the
administration of the government, either by electing all or
particular officials, or through representations, petitions,
demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled
to pay heed.¹

Modern liberty means the freedom to do as one pleases within the
framework of the rule of law, to hold beliefs as one sees fit, to be free
of government interference so as to follow one's inclination and interest.
Ancient liberty, however, meant something entirely different. It
involved:

- exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the
  complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square,
  over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign
  governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgments; in
  examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the
  magistrates; in calling them to appear in front of the
  assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them.

But if this was what the Ancients called liberty, they
admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the
complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the
community... All private actions were submitted to a severe
surveillance. No importance was given to individual
independence, neither in relation to opinions, nor to labour,
nor, above all, to religion... In the domains which seem to us
the most useful, the authority of the social body interposed
itself and obstructed the will of individuals... In the most
domestic of relations the public authority again intervened...
The laws regulated customs, and as customs touch on everything, there was hardly anything that the laws did not regulate.²

According to Constant individuals in the Ancient world did not enjoy the 'liberty' to do and think as they pleased. Their freedom consisted in being members of an independent collective. But within that collective independence the private behaviour of individuals was subject to scrutiny and regulation. For Constant Ancient liberty did not recognise a private sphere beyond the public that could not be regulated by political authorities. Why was that so?

Following Condorcet, Constant contended that the Ancients had no idea or understanding of individual rights. 'Men were,' he argued, 'so to speak, merely machines, whose gears and cog-wheels were regulated by the law.' Continuing he claimed that 'the same subjection characterized the golden centuries of the Roman republic; the individual was in some way lost in the nation, the citizen in the city.'³ Lacking the public/private distinction and a clear idea of individual rights, rights held independently of the public realm, the ancient Greeks and Romans could only know and understand liberty in terms of membership of a collective that was not dominated by another collective.

Implicit in this argument is a view of social development in which human societies and political units evolve from small simple entities to large complex ones. Ancient states were small and simple; they were constrained within a narrow territory and surrounded by other small states. Constant deduces from this that:

the spirit of these republics was bellicose; each people incessantly attacked their neighbours or was attacked by them... All had to buy their security, their independence,
their whole existence at the price of war. This was the constant interest, the almost habitual occupation of the free states of antiquity.\textsuperscript{4}

War was, by necessity, the lot of these states either as would-be conquerors or as people defending themselves from conquest. Their liberty was to be free from subjugation by others. He does not explain however why small units should be more bellicose than large ones, or why their interactions should have taken the form of warfare rather than peaceful exchange. Rather he assumes that small political units are by definition Hobbesian or Thucydidean in nature.

Small conflicting and antagonistic entities evolved into large peaceful ones. Modern society is composed of large units that are largely homogeneous in nature and share common values. 'The modern world,' Constant claimed, 'is sufficiently civilized to find war a burden. Its uniform tendency is towards peace.'\textsuperscript{5} This can only be, however, if somehow the bellicose character of the ancient world has been replaced in the modern world by a more pacific one. The modern world must either be Hobbesian in nature, or Hobbesian calculations in the modern world lead to a preference for commerce over war.

Constant explains this transition by arguing that war and commerce do not represent fundamentally divergent values. Constant claims that:

War and commerce are only two different means of achieving the same end, that of getting what one wants. Commerce is simply a tribute paid to the strength of the possessor by the aspirant to possession. It is an attempt to conquer, by mutual agreement, what one can no longer hope to obtain through violence.\textsuperscript{6}
He continues by arguing that 'a man who was always the stronger would never conceive the idea of commerce.' What turns an individual away from war and towards commerce is the experience that commerce may be a superior way of attaining the goods that he desires:

by proving to him that war, that is the use of his strength against the strength of others, exposes him to a variety of obstacles and defeats, that leads him to resort to commerce, that is to a milder and surer means of engaging the interest of others to agree to what suits his own. War is all impulse, commerce, calculation. Hence it follows that an age must come in which commerce replaces war. We have reached this age.

Commerce replaces war because it is now possible to attain one’s goals without resorting to the dangers of bloodshed. Social evolution has led to 'calculation' replacing 'impulse'. Constant recognises that the Ancients had practised commerce but contends that its form of commerce had been 'impregnated by the spirit of the age, by the atmosphere of war and hostility which surrounded it.' In the modern age commerce had become the 'normal state of things, the only aim, the universal tendency, the true life of nations.'

Moreover commerce itself had wrought significant psychological changes on people, just as individual rights had replaced collective freedom. Modern individuals 'want repose, and with repose comfort, and as a source of comfort, industry.' War is no longer a real possibility for a society composed of individuals in search of a quiet life and a measure of comfort. Constant correctly concluded that 'its hazards no longer offer to individuals benefits that match the results of peaceful work and regular exchanges.'
In other words Constant was arguing that war worked for the Ancients because a successful war brought goods and slaves. Slavery enabled the citizens of antiquity to have the leisure to decide public matters. By contrast in the modern world a war costs more than it is worth. The benefits are less and the pain greater. At the same time commerce has a number of effects on those who live under its rule; it inspires a 'vivid love of individual independence' because it permits people to satisfy their needs and wants without need of the state. It also makes arbitrary power both more oppressive and easier to elude because it changes the nature of property thereby making it much more difficult to seize. Commerce undermines the collective power of the public order in favour of the individual and his and her desire to enjoy their life in a comfortable and relaxed fashion. Commerce has aided the 'progress of civilisation' and helped to create a new type of world:

Commerce has brought nations closer, it has given them customs and habits which are almost identical; the heads of states may be enemies: the peoples are compatriots.

Constant's account of social evolution is quite distinct from those of the Scottish Enlightenment, including that of Adam Smith. For Smith, the intellectual heir of Francis Hutcheson, social evolution is linked to the development of the quality of 'sympathy' that is fostered by commerce and which allows the growth of social ties from small group to nation and beyond. Smith's view of social development is commercial and pacific. Constant, perhaps after having experienced the Revolution and Bonaparte, has a much more Hobbesian and rationalist view of human nature. Small communities are bellicose and, almost as a matter of course, engage in war. The victory of commerce over war is also a matter of calculation; in the modern age war simply does not make as much sense
as commerce. Under changing circumstances people have come to achieve their goals in a different way. This is part of the 'progress of civilisation' but it is unclear if the change from war to commerce has involved a qualitative change in human nature.

There are problems with this account. The first is that there does seem to be two versions of the commerce/war transition. One is the replacement of impulse by calculation, or the transition from Achilles to Odysseus. The other implies that both war and commerce are a matter of calculation. The difference between the two versions is substantial. If one accepts the impulse to calculation model then this would imply some sort of change in human nature. If both war and commerce are the products of calculation then it must be possible for a state in a commercial age to calculate that war may still be a worthwhile means of achieving one's objectives.

Constant elaborates on some of these themes in his earlier work *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their relation to European Civilization*. In this work Constant argues that war has not necessarily been a bad thing, indeed it has been something that has developed all that is great in human nature:

At certain stages in the history of mankind, war is simply in man's nature. It favours the development of his finest and grandest faculties. It opens up to him a treasury of precious enjoyments. It forms in him that greatness of soul, skill, sang-froid, scorn for death, without which he could never be confident that there was any form of cowardice he might not display...War teaches him heroic devotion and makes him form sublime friendships....It crowns noble deeds with noble leisure. But all of these advantages of war depend on one
indispensable condition: that war should be the natural outcome of the situation and the national spirit of the people.\textsuperscript{14} For Constant, however, this stage of history when war brought out many of the positive attributes of human nature has passed. Commerce has changed the very nature of warfare. Once a military people would have defeated a merely commercial people but now the opposite was now the case. The English with their new commercial form of government has defeated the more militaristic French.

For Constant commerce has changed the fundamental values of society. It has replaced the heroic values of an aristocratic age with the prosaic ones of a bourgeois age. In a commercial age warfare has lost both its charm and its utility: modern weaponry denies the valour and heroism of aristocratic warfare based on hand-to-hand conflict. In their place utility has triumphed as the dominant value of the age. This is another version of the 'impulse' to 'calculation' argument.

The consequences of this transformation from the 'heroic' to the 'useful' are significant because they mean that any modern military regime 'would adopt the ferocity of the warlike spirit, but it would retain commercial self-interest.'\textsuperscript{15} Such regimes would be motivated by self-interest and greed and therefore not be restrained by the traditional warrior ethos. They would, according to Constant, turn 'the progresses of civilization against civilization' being 'united among themselves only like wild animals that hurl themselves in packs upon the flocks upon which they prey.'\textsuperscript{16} Modern warfare must be much more brutal than its ancient counterpart because the laws of honour no longer prevail. Hence, in Constant's eyes, not only has war been made anachronistic by the development of modern liberty but also to practise war in an age of
commerce and utility would be to create a monster that could not be
controlled.

This argument, however, is not a peculiarly modern one. In the
Peloponnesian War, commercial, imperial Athens chose to ignore the
traditional rules of Greek warfare. Pericles 'calculated' that Athens could
not defeat Sparta if she followed the traditional Greek model and
engaged her enemies in a traditional Hoplite battle. Instead Athens
refused to engage Sparta, preferring instead to hide behind the walls of
the city. In the pages of Thucydides one can encounter the moral
degradation that Athens encountered as a consequence of her
'calculating' approach to warfare from the plague to the Melian dialogue
to the humiliation of the Sicilian campaign.17

Constant identifies a number of disturbing effects of war in an age
of commerce: it will corrupt one part of the population and will demand of
the rest 'its passive obedience and sacrifices, in such a way as to disturb
its reason, pervert its judgement and overturn all its ideas.'18 It will
corrump the young, those who should be the bearers of civilisation by
intoxicating their minds with brilliant dreams of military glory so that
'they will disdain every peaceful study, every sedentary occupation.'19

In antiquity, Constant claims, conquerors did not concern
themselves with the customs or habits of those they conquered. In the
modern age, however, those who build empires 'wish their empire to
present an appearance of uniformity... The same code of law, the same
measures, the same regulations.'20 This contrast is not entirely true; in
his account of the Peloponnesian war Thucydides describes how the war
became ideological in nature with members of the Athenian empire
adopting democratic form of government while those on the Spartan side
oligarchic forms.21
Modern warfare is pernicious because it is warfare carried out in an age of commerce and therefore it adjusts itself to the values of the age: it no longer produces virtue or benefits because now people seek comfort, justice and wish no more than to be left alone to get on with their lives. Constant sums it up in these terms:

The commercial nations of modern Europe, industrious, civilized, placed on a territory large enough for their needs, linked to other peoples by relations the interruption of which would be a disaster, have nothing to hope for from conquest. A useless war is the greatest offence that a government today can commit. It destroys every social guarantee without compensation; it jeopardizes every form of liberty; it injures every interest; it upsets every security; it weighs upon every fortune.\textsuperscript{22}

What Constant has in his sights is the harsh Jacobin spirit which led to the bloodiness of the Revolution and was absorbed into Bonapartism: a fierce conquering spirit that Constant recognised was antipathetic to the 'progress of civilisation' that had been fostered by commerce and its benign influences. Hence he attacked both Rousseau and Mably and their desire to resurrect ancient liberty, and identified himself with Montesquieu and the modern type of political regime represented by England. Like Montesquieu he identified the fierceness of republicanism with monkish asceticism and fanaticism.\textsuperscript{23}

There is a subtlety and ambiguity in Constant's argument. His is not a bourgeois condemnation of war but rather a recognition that war is no longer really a feasible or appropriate form of activity in a modern age of commerce. Constant's relationship to the modern commercial regime is ambiguous. Unlike the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment he does not
celebrate the new commercial order but accepts the necessity of accepting it. But Constant’s basic thesis in a less subtle and vulgarised form has become a mainstay of modern liberalism: that the rise and spread of commerce and its associated liberal values has made war redundant, an anachronism in a modern globalised world. The Free Traders of the mid nineteenth century, such as Cobden and Bright, believed this to be the case. Most recently Francis Fukuyama has noted the unwarlike character of liberal societies and the fact that they rarely, if ever, make war on each other.\textsuperscript{24}

Is the argument put subtly by Constant and more bluntly by his successors really the case? Does war precede commerce? Does the rise of commercial society help bring about the end of war or at least make it extremely unattractive?

How one answers this question will partly depend on how one views the nature of war and its relationship to other forms of violent human activity. Constant had in view a particular version of warfare: it was an aristocratic activity performed according to a set of rules that enabled its participants to achieve honour, glory as well as booty and slaves. For him this meant primarily ancient Greece and Rome, although he accepted, probably mistakenly, the modern and commercial nature of Athens.

Following Constant and Montesquieu Paul Rahe has argued that Greece gave primacy to war and politics over commerce. He contends that the Greeks attempted to

\begin{itemize}
\item insulate the political community from the influence of the market by suppressing or restricting the passion for profit
\item and by deliberately putting psychological distance between citizens and traders.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{itemize}
Rahe notes the absence in ancient Greece of so many of the practices available to modern commerce, including loans for interest and a real estate market. He also describes the Greeks as having an aversion to labour and industry and not really being interested in the development of practical improvements. In a word their values did not include 'utility'. Instead they had a desire to live independently and not to be the client of another.

It was politics, war and the warrior ethos that permeated Greek life. Even in the case of Athens democracy meant the democratisation of aristocratic warrior values as found in the instruction manual of paideia, Homer. As Rahe notes 'For profit, men may kill. It is for love and glory that they sometimes die.'\textsuperscript{26} The Greeks pursued glory and the quest for it informed their lives: a young citizen would one day have to face his moment of truth supporting his fellow citizens in bloody and brutal hand-to-hand conflict.

Interestingly Rahe notes that cities sharing a common origin and extremely common nomoi rarely went to war; the crucial conflict was between the Ionian Athenians and the Dorian Spartans.\textsuperscript{27} Hence he emphasises the significance of the 'deep-seated anger that shaped the Corinthians' policy toward their renegade colonists the Corcyraeans.'\textsuperscript{28} as a factor leading to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.

War and the warrior ethos saturated the culture of ancient Greece and the Roman Republic to an extent that is unimaginable today. Greece, as seen through the eyes of Thucydides, appears to have been in a Hobbesian state of nature. But, as Josiah Ober has pointed out, it was a limited game based on certain rules that included the need to declare a state of war, the erection of battlefield trophies as a sign of victory, the need for a ritual challenge to precede a battle, the recognition that
warfare should be limited to warriors and a limitation on the use of non-
hoplite arms. These rules only began to break down during the
Peloponnesian War.29

But to what extent was the Greek pattern of warfare that so
exercised the imagination of Constant, universal? Cross-civilisational
evidence would tend to suggest that it was not. To get this pattern of
warfare you need a degree of bonding such as was the case in city states.
Ancient Sumer, for example, does fit this model because it was composed
of small cities constantly striving against each other. But in Sumer as in
Greece this small feuding community eventually fell prey to the ambitions
of an outside imperial ruler.

How then are we to explain the nature of warfare, its rise and
possible future and its relationship to commerce as a human activity?
The most common approach to the evolution of humans from foraging
through agriculture to complex social structures and the state follows
the Enlightenment/ Marxist position emphasising material production and
political economy but with minimal discussion of warfare. The volume in
the Blackwell History of the World on early human societies by Peter
Bogucki has followed this emphasis on political economy and only rarely
mentions warfare. Bogucki follows a modified version of the Elman
Service schema of from band to group to chiefdom to state.30

The remainder of this paper will examine two studies on the origins
and nature of warfare, Lawrence Keeley's War Before Civilization and
Robert O'Connell's Ride of the Second Horseman, looking in particular at
what they have to say regarding the relationship between war and
commerce. O'Connell accepts the view that pre-history of humanity was
fundamentally peaceful that 'we were free of war for most of our
existence',31 and that it required a change in the nature of human
existence to bring on the onset of warfare, changes that upset the balance within human ecology. 'Humankind', he contends, 'was not born to war but came to it late in our existence.' Consequently he describes warfare as a 'transitory' element of human existence. But then O'Connell has a very particular definition of war that includes the following elements:

'direction by some form of governmental structure, and a military organization determined at least in part by that structure... combatants are willing...to conduct a somewhat protracted campaign aimed at palpable economic and/or political goals'  

This definition of war implies some sort of state structure, or at least a sophisticated chiefdom and so excludes, by definition, warlike activities carried out by non-state societies. It is not 'simply armed violence.'

According to O'Connell by 2000 BCE war had become a significant element in the operation of the 4 types of society that had emerged out of the Neolithic: pastoral nomadism, city-states, imperial tyranny, maritime enclaves. Warfare, he claims, was 'a primary manifestation of the basic technological and ecological adaptations of these societies.' He views war in Mesopotamia as the product of the interaction between agriculturalists and pastoralists. In particular he sees it arising out of nomadic raids on settled villages which, once initiated, then spread throughout the rest of the Eurasian landmass from China to Europe.

But that is not the whole story. He also considers warfare to be a product of the imbalances that developed within the new urban environment of the Sumerian city state, imbalances that helped to create what he terms 'true warfare'. Consider how O'Connell describes the ecology of the Sumerian city state:
'a system falling out of balance, one which the internal mechanisms of control... are incapable of righting... significant labor and demographic requirements that were not being satisfied from within....most potent means of addressing them was externally through mass aggression and enslavement...necessary ignition point had been reached...the resulting societies were dynamically unstable along a number of dimensions more amenable to external than internal modulation, the practice of warfare became generalized.'
'the implosion-ignition-explosion process taking place within the walled cauldrons of Sumer'.

This definition would seem to assume that warfare was a form of pathology linked to settled agricultural existence combined with urban development. The struggle for resources and the growth of property stimulated warfare and led to its universal adoption. It is interesting the way in which O'Connell uses the language of both pathology and disease. For example he states that 'warfare must have jumped from town to town much like the progress of an infectious disease.'

Once warfare gets going it establishes a pattern that pulls in all the societies that it touches. Once one city becomes aggressive the others must follow, and the contagion then spreads to surrounding societies. O'Connell asserts that 'each resorted to war as a consequence of internal instability, the net result at a higher level was rough equilibrium—or, put negatively, universal frustration.' Warfare was adopted as a rational means of solving the struggle for resources in an agricultural society in which resources were limited. And of course this limitation of resources is true of all agricultural societies as they all face the possibility of occasional dearth and famine. In effect this is an
adaptation of Carneiro’s argument that ‘environmental circumscription’ is the primary cause of warfare. But it also a restatement of the logic underlying the Hobbesian/Thucydidean version of human nature.

On this view once the warfare cycle gets going in an agricultural/pastoral world the result is a zero-sum game. City-state gives way to unstable agrarian empire which in turn becomes the target of outside nomadic groups. In such a world Ibn Khaldun is a far better guide to understanding history than western evolutionary thinkers. O’Connell points out that soldiers of agrarian empires were generally of poor quality and were often there just to be slaughtered by the well armed aristocrats. This explains why regimes based on the communal solidarity of the city state, such as Athens, could be so effective against agrarian empires such as Persia.

For O’Connell war was a product of the agrarian age and only lasted so long as states were fundamentally agrarian and imperial in nature. Looking for an alternative he finds it in the Minoan and Harappan civilisations. Considering Minoan archaeology he sees ‘a commercial nexus, more commonwealth than empire.’ He argues that the Minoans and the Harappans, who appear to be both pacific and mercantile in nature, ‘marked a new phase in human subsistence, and one destined to eventually rule the earth. But their emergence was premature.’ Even if the drainage system had not brought about the end of the Harappans, O’Connell argues that the Aryans eventually would have. Hence he concludes

War would marginalize them geographically, pushing mercantile states to the very edge of the littoral, where they might survive through strategic retreats to the sea and safety. Here they would remain like mammals in a world of
dinosaurs until the time when the style of life they
represented was sufficiently powerful to dominate on its own
terms—and, in the process, unseat the Second Horseman.\textsuperscript{42}

According to O'Connell commercial states are fundamentally
unwarlike and so can achieve their goals without recourse to war, although
they were eventually drawn back into the world of war though their
contact with their neighbours. Minoan civilisation, portrayed as both
commercial and pacific, was also doomed through its contact with
agricultural barbarians, the Mycanean Greeks.

It is interesting that O'Connell uses the term 'commonwealth' to
describe Minoan civilisation because the same term is used by Maissals to
describe the Harappans. Maissals notes the lack of state structures,
monumental architecture and most importantly, weaponry in the
archaeological evidence for this civilisation. He argues that there was no
single model of the evolution of civilisation. Social evolution could lead to
the Egyptian empire in which one chiefdom eventually triumphed over the
others, to Sumer where there were warring city states, to a China
developed along kinship lines and the Indus where there is little sign of
warfare. Social evolution could lead to warfare and the state or it could
lead to a relatively peaceful 'commonwealth'. According to this view it
was not so much agriculture that was the problem as the circumstances
under which particular societies developed.\textsuperscript{43}

In his discussion of the evolution of chiefdoms Timothy Earle
makes a similar point. Earle uses the ideas of power developed by Michael
Mann and applies them to three disparate examples: The Wankas in South
America, Denmark circa 1000 BC and Hawai'i. Noting that warfare is
characteristic of chiefdoms he argues that the effects of this warfare
varied according to place. The Wankas fought over land, animals and
women and the result was a series of fragmented chiefdoms marked by fortified hilltop settlements. Only conquest by the Incas overcame this fragmentation. The Danish chiefdoms had no fortifications and seem to have been largely engaged in cattle raiding. In Hawai‘i, however, chiefdoms evolved into centralised and hierarchical political entities that engaged in constant warfare in a way that is reminiscent of the ancient Greeks. As Earle concludes:

‘warfare was a strategy that determined real political relationships in the Hawaiian islands. Succession was won on the battlefield, and rival island paramounts continually confronted each other in battles of conquest.’44

It was a zero sum game that was only broken with the introduction of European weapons that allowed the creation, through conquest, of a Hawaiian state.

Earle’s discussion disproves part of O’Connell’s argument, that warfare is limited to states and civilisations, and demonstrates that Maissals is correct in emphasising that social evolution can move along a number of paths. Nevertheless O’Connell is right in asserting that despite these differing evolutionary patterns warfare eventually ‘got’ all these places in the end. There is a contagious element to warfare that follows the logic of Hobbes,

O’Connell’s other point is that the end of what Ernest Gellner terms ‘Agraria’ should mean the end of war: ‘We learned to wage war because it made sense in terms of the of the kinds of society we lived in. That is far less true today.’45 The circumscription imposed by agriculture could finally be overcome. In the end, according to O’Connell, the emergence of a commercial order means the end of war. This is for reasons not that far removed from Constant: the circumstances of a
commercial order with its capacity to supply plenty, makes warfare a less attractive option in relation to peaceful exchange and trade.

Keeley disputes the view that war is intrinsically linked to Agraria. For him war is not the product of a particular ecological setup but is endemic in most human societies. He concedes that there are a small number of pacific human societies and that they are more commonly found amongst foragers than agriculturalists. He argues that war is war, and that there has been a tendency to underestimate the capacity of non-state societies to wage war. He rejects totally the idea that only states engage in war and that what non-states engage in are 'massacres'. Such societies are just as capable of organised warfare, he contends, only their resources are more limited.46

At another level he agrees with O'Connell that warfare is not rooted in human biology and has more to do with the circumstances in which humans and their societies are placed:

Not all societies are continually at war, nor are all wars equally terrible. As we have established, warfare is not a constant feature of human social life. It follows that explanations of these differences in warfare must focus on the variable characteristics and circumstances of human existence, not on constants of human biology and behavior.47

The nature of war and warfare varies from one society to another but at all levels of social order, claims Keeley, there are forms of human activity that can be termed warfare.

A consequence of this argument is a rejection of the idea that war is linked to the ecology of Agraria and should come to an end when commerce replaces agriculture. Keeley argues that for both states and non-states the motives and causes of warfare are 'substantially the same
and that economic motives predominate' while 'the precipitating causes of most wars' are 'acts of violence that provoke further violence.'

In pre-state societies war breaks out because there is conflict over resources and/or as a result of the need to take revenge for the homicides that have been committed. Keeley argues that war erupts from acts of violence and then escalates out of control. Pre-state and pre-Chiefdom war, contends Keeley, is not about honour, glory or prestige. It is about revenge and payback. It does not involve subjugation and tribute but it can be brutal. Once in motion it cannot be stopped until each side has suffered approximately an equal amount and is satisfied that peace is possible.

This would seem to support the O'Connell view of the 'contagion' of warfare, but also, like O'Connell, Keeley portrays war as a consequence of Hobbesian/Thucydidean logic. In an uncontrolled state of nature fear, glory and profit combined precipitate acts of violence that then escalate into further acts of violence. In non-state societies the objectives are limited because the level of social organisation does not permit continuing subjugation or enforced slavery. At a supposedly more advanced level of social complexity the Greeks, like the Hawaiians, engaged in an endless agon that no one could win, and that only ended with outside intervention. Michael Mann has noted that even in early agrarian empires the logistics of military operations made both the degree of control precarious and the long-term stability of the empire unlikely. The Assyrians attempted to avoid this problem through brutality on a grand scale combined with mass deportations of subject peoples. The Romans sensibly amalgamated their allies in Italy into a variety of relationships with Rome, but this did not prevent the Social War over the issue of these peoples being granted Roman citizenship. The logic of war is such that once it has commenced it
keeps going and even the triumph of a conquering empire does not bring final resolution.

Keeley attacks what he sees as other fallacies regarding the nature of warfare, in particular the causes of war. He does not believe that the frequency of warfare is related to density of population arguing that 'increasing population density is the mother or handmaiden of organization and invention, not the father of war.'\(^6\) He also argues that intermarriage and trade are not antidotes to war; indeed he contends that the evidence demonstrates that peoples are most likely to fight with peoples with whom they trade and marry because they are the peoples with whom they are most in contact.\(^5\) Trade between Rome and Carthage was at a peak at the time of the outbreak of the 2nd Punic War.\(^5\) The European powers fought those with whom they traded and sometimes married during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Keeley believes that disputes over economic resources, particularly when one group holds a monopoly over a particular resource, and discord over marital arrangements, were traditionally a rich source of the sorts of conflict that lead to wars.\(^5\) Keeley also notes that the presence of goods produced outside a particular society in the archaeological record is no evidence of peaceful exchange. Archaeologists, he contends, often mistake plunder for trade.\(^5\) In this he agrees with Constant that war and commerce are two means to the same end, only they are not historical stages of human development.

What then does Keeley believe leads to warfare? One of his theories is that of the 'bad apple', the presence of a society in an area that for some reason gets a taste for warfare, decides to become aggressive and then begins to 'disrupt the neighbourhood'. Rome is one example of such a 'bad apple', although it could also be the case that
Roman militarism was a response to the insecure circumstances in which it found itself. This leads to the second of Keeley's contentions: that warlike cultures have developed in response to natural calamities or hard times created by ecological and climatic changes. Keeley also emphasises the importance of technological developments, in terms of food production, weaponry and transport that give one group an advantage over others.56 Finally he emphasises the importance of frontiers in creating an environment that encourages war, 'regions of cultural antagonism where the legal and cultural constraints on violence are lax'57 and the temptation to acquire goods easily from other groups through violent means is great. Keeley sums up his conclusions thus:

'One might expect warfare to be more frequent in situations involving at least one especially belligerent party, severe economic difficulties, and a lack of shared institutions for resolving disputes or common values emphasising nonviolence.' 56

According to this view warfare is a response to circumstance. If times are bad and the opportunity arises people will resort to warfare as a means of attaining their ends. This is most likely to happen in a frontier where rules are lax and the temptation to achieve one's ends through war is most likely to be stimulated. Groups or societies can be goaded into becoming militaristic and then once this militarism achieves success it becomes a spur to further militarism. But then a militaristic society can eventually turn into a relatively pacific society. 'Military ferocity,' claims Keeley, 'is not a fixed quality of any race or culture, but a temporary condition'.59 This could be used to explain the development of Rome from militaristic republic to a relatively pacific empire. Japan and even Germany fit this model. Military virtues become so by force of
circumstance and when they are useful to a social unit. War is no more than a 'method, derived directly from hunting, for getting from one group what another lacks and cannot peacefully obtain.' Keeley also argues that there is 'universal preference for peace.' Soldiers are often seen as polluted, and the leaders in many militaristic societies are not warriors but those who make peace.

Keeley’s argument would seem to put a dampener on Constant’s thesis and O’Connell’s argument because for him war and economics are linked. This is not necessarily the case. In a relatively simple society it is much easier to go to war and the result is low-level endemic violence. Social complexity makes warfare more costly and difficult, it tips the balance away from war and towards commerce. Warfare induces a level of social co-operation, as a social unit must come together to oppose an enemy. It can be argued that commerce extends that social co-operation by bringing groups together so that war becomes embedded in commerce. Keeley cites the example of the South American group of peoples, the Xingu, where each makes certain items used by the others and this seems to prevent conflict developing amongst the groups. This case would seem to support the free trade argument regarding complementarity of producing goods although Keeley argues that a degree of artificiality may be needed to preserve the peace.

Keeley assumes a Hobbesian/Thucydidean account of human nature that leads to the view that we may need a Leviathan to constrain war, but a Leviathan in which commerce can play a role by creating the circumstances that make the risk of war too great. He seems to reject the view that commerce fundamentally alters human nature and the way humans relate to each other. At the same time he does put forward the view, similar to Constant, that the total war of the modern age can be
distinguished from the limited aristocratic war of earlier civilisations, and he claims that this means that modern warfare has become more like the warfare of non-state peoples. War plus utility truly becomes 'harsh realm.' Keeley's conclusions are that it is important that means of arbitration exist to resolve conflicts and that we need to create a world composed of peoples producing complementary goods so that peoples are brought together. Commerce can replace war but it is artifice rather than nature that is required to produce this result.

There is another argument against Constant that needs to be considered. He attacked Mably and Rousseau in the name of modern liberty, and yet the hold of modern liberty on many people has been very weak while the desire to return to ancient liberty extraordinary powerful. This can be seen in the following:

1. The French Revolution was fuelled by a Jacobinism that wanted to recreate Roman republicanism in a modern setting even if the consequences were political upheaval, leading to expansionist and militaristic tendencies and the destruction of many of the economic gains that France had made in the previous twenty five years.

2. The anti-bourgeois feeling of much of the period from 1815 until 1945 leading to a significant revolt against liberalism in favour of irrationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. This anti-bourgeois sentiment fuelled a desire amongst the children of the bourgeoisie itself to create some sort of heroic new social order, be it communist or fascist. In particular the fascism of the nineteen thirties sought to return to heroic aristocratic values in opposition to what it saw as the effete and decadent values of commercialism.
3. The occasional outbursts against commerce and commercial values that have occurred since the Second World War in favour of the need to re-create community.

The question may be posed: if comfort and freedom to do as one pleases are so important why have they proved to be insufficient? As we have seen even Constant himself felt a nostalgic attraction for the virtues of the warrior ethos. I should like to make a couple of observations:

1. As Keeley points out young men are the ones most likely to gain from war and are often those most opposed to modern liberty. This can be seen particularly in the case of fascism.

2. The search for meaning and for a feeling of self-worth, what Fukuyama calls *thymos,* is not very well fulfilled by modern liberty, particularly in a secular age where people seek this in the here and now. The Romantic attraction of war, or at least of heroic values, remains quite powerful.

It is well to remember that Constant was right and that in an age of modern liberty war does become more terrible and horrific than it was previously. Whatever one may think of commerce, although it may not be the antidote to war, it remains infinitely superior to it as a means of allocating resources amongst peoples.

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2 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 311.
3 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p.312
4 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' pp 312–13.
5 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 313
6 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 313
7 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 313
8 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p 313
9 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p.314
10 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 314
11 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 315
12 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p. 325
14 Benjamin Constant, The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their relation to European
Civilization, in Political Writings, p. 51
15 Constant, The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation, p. 56
16 Constant, 'The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' p. 57
especially pp. 400–408, and Book VI.
18 Constant, 'The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' p. 64
19 Constant, 'The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' p. 68
20 Constant, 'The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' p. 73
21 Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War, pp. 242–5
22 Constant, 'The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' p. 81
23 Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns,' p.318–19.
25 Paul Rahe, Republica Ancient and Modern1: The Ancien Régime in Classical Greece, University of
26 Rahe, Republica Ancient and Modern1, p. 97
27 Rahe, Republica Ancient and Modern1, p. 95
28 Rahe, Republica Ancient and Modern1, p. 95
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32 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 225
33 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 5
34 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 225
36 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, pp. 95, 96.
37 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 97
38 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 98
40 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 208
41 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 222
42 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 222
43 Charles Maisals, Early Civilizations of the Old World: The Formative Histories of Egypt, The
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Feinman and Joyce Marcus (Eds.) Archaic States, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 1998,
45 O'Connell, Ride of the Second Horseman, p. 243
46 Lawrence H Keeley, War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage, Oxford University
47 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 113
48 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p.116
49 Keeley, War Before Civilization, chapter 10.
50 Michael Mann, The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1, A history of power from the beginning to
51 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 121
52 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 122
54 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 123
55 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p.126
56 Keeley, War Before Civilization, chapter 9.
57 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 131
58 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 127
59 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 130
60 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 161
61 Keeley, War Before Civilization, p. 145.


\(^{64}\) Fukuyama, *The End of History*, pp. 162 ff.