

# War, memes and memplexes

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## Culture, memes and war

Scientists imagine that before the universe came into being it existed in a state of potentiality. Time and space were held in abeyance, ‘in a fog of possibility’ as one commentator puts it, until the Big Bang.<sup>1</sup> A similar process is probably true of the origins of war. We might like to imagine—those of us familiar with Stanley Kubrick’s film, *2001: a space odyssey*—that from killing baboons it was a small step to killing a member of our own species, in one weapon-wielding moment. But our biological essence would appear to be one of cooperation, not intra-species aggression. We probably began warring against each other only when we started to fence in our land; in which case war is a product of (agri)culture, not the Hobbesian ‘state of nature’. In due course, when we started building cities and walling ourselves in we invented ritualized warfare, with its own protocols, taboos and restrictions. War has a history—a very recent one, dating back 12,000 years to the first walled city, Jericho.

Whether war can be traced back to nature or nurture is not really the point. The truth probably is that the two are so closely intertwined that it is now impossible to tell one from the other. As biological creatures we are necessarily social animals. Culture is programmed into us as a species, and war is an especially interesting cultural product. The question is whether we have been brainwashed into war over the millennia by a ‘false consciousness’ (most recently, nationalism), whether we have been misled for centuries by our priests and politicians. But this is not in itself a Darwinian question. The Darwinian still wants to know why young men are so susceptible to what the writer Luis Borges called ‘the moral and ascetic charms of war’, and therefore open to exploitation by priests and politicians who still send them off to fight.<sup>2</sup>

It is easier to explain away the willingness to kill. Anthropologists can find good instrumental reasons for taking another person’s life, such as competition for scarce resources or breeding stock. But the dying is difficult to explain away in Darwinian terms, for each of us is programmed to avoid pain and especially early death (and war is usually a young man’s calling). Natural selection tells us that an

<sup>1</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A reading diary: a year of favourite books* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Manguel, *A reading diary*, p. 84.

early death is something to be avoided. Those rare individuals, the warriors, who invite it do so because they believe that they owe their life a good death, and that a good death makes life meaningful—but meaning, too, of course, is a cultural construction.

Those who object to Darwinian explanations are often deeply opposed to any proposals to recast questions in the social sciences and humanities in terms of cultural evolution. But war does seem to have evolved in a way that Darwinian theory would suggest. It has a wide appeal across the centuries and across cultures, which should prompt us to ask whether something corresponding to natural selection is taking place. Are some ideas, such as war, more competitive than others because of their intrinsic appeal or merit, or do they persist because they compete with other ideas (peace), survive the competition and spread? In her book *Blood rites*, Barbara Ehrenreich reaches the conclusion that war is contagious. It spreads from one culture to the next. In some senses, she adds, it is useful to see it as a 'self-replicating pattern of behaviour'. War, she suggests, should be seen as a loose assemblage of algorithms or programs (in the computer sense of the term) for collective action. As a meme it is particularly tenacious. The idea that it is glorious to die for one's country persisted for centuries. 'Culture in other words cannot always be counted upon "to be on our side". In so far as it allows humans to escape the imperatives of biology, it may do so only to entrap us in what are often crueller imperatives of its own.'<sup>3</sup>

The word 'meme' is an abbreviation of another, *mimeme*, which is derived from the Greek *mimesis* (imitation). It has now entered the English language. It appears in the most recent edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where it is defined as 'an element of culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means'. A number of writers now employ the term 'mimetics'—the theory that much of human social evolution is based on the differential spread of units of culture called memes (a notion originally proposed by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The selfish gene*). Memes are said to resemble genes in that they produce cultural change through a process similar to natural selection: those memes that are passed on by imitation and learning tend to dominate social life. The concept is catching on fast. In a recent book James Bennett argues that over the centuries the English-speaking world has been 'infested' by various 'mimetic viral plagues' which have gained a foothold in the culture before being expelled. They include 'continental feudalism', 'revolutionary utopianism', 'French revolutionary idealism' and, of course, 'Marxism'. My favourite example is 'slaveism', which Bennett is keen to argue was primarily a Spanish/Portuguese phenomenon which the British felt compelled to copy until realizing the error of their ways.<sup>4</sup>

Some confusion has arisen over the definition of the word 'meme', and indeed in *The selfish gene* Dawkins unconsciously misled his readers by claiming that 'just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood rites: origins and history of the passions of war* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> James C. Bennett, *The Anglosphere challenge: why English-speaking nations will lead the way in the twenty-first century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 5.

sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain by a process which, in the broad sense of the term, can be called 'imitation'.<sup>5</sup> The problem with this account is that it is the gene that is the unit of selection, even though it is the phenotype which is actually subject to the process of selection. The gene is the replicator, or set of instructions; the phenotype is the physical manifestation of the organism, the behaviour resulting from the set of instructions. Dawkins later corrected himself with the following definition: 'A meme should be regarded as a unit of information residing in a brain. It has a definite structure realised in whatever medium the brain uses for storing information . . . This is to distinguish it from phenotypic effects which are its consequences in the outside world.'<sup>6</sup> In other words, a meme is merely a set of instructions, the blueprint, not the product. Yet at the popular level memes still continue to be discussed in terms of his 1976 definition.

A far more serious objection to memes is that it is difficult to demonstrate experimentally that they actually exist. Biologically, a gene is a distinct part of the chromosome. Chemically it consists of DNA. Physically it consists of a double helix. As Dawkins himself acknowledges, memes have not yet found their Watson or Crick. Memes—we have to presume—are to be found in brains, where they are largely invisible to observation.<sup>7</sup> Memes are hypothetical constructs inferred from observation of behaviour rather than observed in themselves. Does this make them useless at the explanatory level, as Dawkins's critics suggest?<sup>8</sup>

Nothing would please meme supporters more than to present the world with a list of detailed, experimentally testable examples. Unfortunately, there is no way to establish experientially whether memes exist. But then it is difficult to prove much of quantum physics through experimentation. We know, for example, at the very least, that we can divide matter into atoms, that those atoms can be divided in turn into the subatomic particles—electrons, protons and neutrons—and possibly that these particles can themselves be divided into quarks. I say 'possibly' because quarks have never been observed. It is not entirely unwarranted to argue, as some scientists do, that physicists have no business wasting their time on another hypothesis, string theory, which postulates a new feature of nature some 100 million billion times smaller than anything we can directly probe through our senses, enhanced or otherwise. The debate is informed only, in part, by physics. It also involves distinct philosophies about how physics should be done. The 'traditionalists' want theoretical work to be closely tied to experimental observation. Others think we are ready to tackle questions that are beyond our present technological ability to test empirically.<sup>9</sup>

The same could be said of memes. In the end, it is a matter of faith that they will one day be demonstrated to exist. What we can say is that the world is beginning

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The selfish gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The extended phenotype*, quoted in Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: genes, memes and the meaning of life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Blackmore, *The meme machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Greene, *The elegant universe: superstrings, hidden dimensions and the quest for the ultimate theory* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 231.

to make money out of taking them seriously. In 2004 a group in California carried out an experiment in meme production by launching on the market (or the ‘meme pool’) a new meme—the term ‘bright’ as a popular word for an atheist, in the attempt to replicate the way in which, for example, the word ‘gay’ has come almost exclusively to mean homosexual. (So far they have not had much success.) The evolutionary psychologist Paul Marsden has even launched a company called Brand Genetics to help firms identify and clone strong memes in the marketplace.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not memes exist, or the idea of them will catch on, I would contend that meme theory provides a fascinating insight into the origins and evolution of war through the centuries. And, at the very least, it provides a unifying framework for thinking about the different style of war in the present age.

In all cases, including war, we have to know how a meme replicates itself. One suggestion is the idea of ‘intelligent design’—in the case of war, through manipulation by states or political leaders. War has always, in part at least, been intelligently designed. The best example of this is militarism, a nineteenth-century ideology that reinforced another, fascism. Another intelligently designed meme, class war, never really took off as Marx and Engels expected because it was hijacked by nationalism, in one particular case by Stalin’s commitment to ‘socialism in one country’.

A more compelling explanation for the appeal of war is that memes are passed on from one generation to the next rather like viruses: they *infect* a host. William James wrote that the spreading of religion, which he believed was also transmitted culturally, was due to what he called a ‘mystical germ’—and it was, he wrote, a very common germ for it had created ‘the rank and file of believers’.<sup>11</sup> Religion appeals to many because it creates a sense of belonging. James’s ‘mystical germ’ was not a gene, it was a germ, and germs are caught by infection. So, in that sense, we may say that war replicates itself contagiously.

Another explanation, which I find much more convincing, is Ehrenreich’s: that war persists because of its capacity to *compete* successfully with other memes. Assuming memes exist, it is possible to maintain that the survival value of any cultural instructor is the same as its function: the survival and replication of itself. A meme, writes Daniel Dennett, is ‘an information packet with attitude—a recipe or instruction manual for doing something cultural’.<sup>12</sup> Memes can be translated into any language, whether that used by hunter-gatherer societies or that of risk societies today. They persist because they can be transmitted or copied, and it is their persistence which is most remarkable. They persist because they are so adaptable, which is what Clausewitz meant when he wrote that every era fights war differently; in every age war has its own distinctive ‘cultural grammar’.

And the most convincing explanation for the persistence of war is that the memes that survive interact competitively and combine with others. Those that survive have a transcultural appeal, or flourish in the presence of other memes

<sup>10</sup> Oona Strathern, *A brief history of the future* (London: Robinson, 2007), p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> Martin E. Marty, ed., Introduction to *William James: the varieties of religious experience*, in Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the spell: religion as a natural phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the spell*, p. 350.

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(such as religion) and thus give rise to what Dawkins calls meme complexes. In the earliest days, simple memes survived by virtue of their universal appeal to human psychology. When war became more organized and structured, as society became more complex, we reached the memeplex stage.

### *Memplexes*

Of course, meme theory has its critics. People dislike the idea that war is a virus that infects its host, because it is deemed to attack the principle of free will. Thus Dawkins writes that when you plant a meme in a mind you literally parasitize a brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize a genetic mechanism of a host cell.<sup>13</sup> Dawkins takes religion as a key example. Many religions teach the objectively implausible but subjectively appealing doctrine that the soul survives death.<sup>14</sup> The idea of immortality has itself survived and spread because it caters to wishful thinking, and wishful thinking counts because human psychology has a near-universal tendency to let belief be coloured by desire. It is the idea that the soul persists after death that animated the Crusaders, and that animates suicide bombers in today's Middle East.

Daniel Dennett prefers a different metaphor: symbiosis. A meme can be symbiotic in that it encourages sacrifice and altruism, attributes without which we would not, as humans, have achieved so much. Dennett is aware that claiming that memes are interested only in their own fitness (i.e. their own reproduction) is an argument against human agency, but he reminds us that there are three kinds of meme. There are parasites, whose presence lowers the fitness of their hosts; commensals, whose presence is neutral in effect; and mutualists, whose presence enhances the fitness of both the host and the guest.<sup>15</sup> We should expect memes to come in all three shapes. Some enhance our fitness (childrearing, food preparation); some are neutral but are important for us in other respects (music, literacy); and some may be positively harmful (war). But when we look at the history of war in detail we find that it fulfils all three functions at the same time. It has made many societies more competitive; it has inspired great art, and enhanced the richness of life; it has inspired others to great deeds, not always on the battlefield. As Robert Wright reminds us, until very recently war has rarely been zero-sum. Only in the twentieth century did it become so harmful that it threatened at one point to destroy western society, which had mastered and perfected it more than any other.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever argument we prefer, writes Mary Midgley, meme theory is still rather bleak because it suggests that our thoughts tend to aim at their own advantage rather than ours. We are left with the prospect that some memes, like war, discourage the exercise of judgement through which we might decide that peace is actually better for us, just as faith (the meme for religion—is God just a computer virus, asks Dawkins?) disadvantages—so some claim—the exercise of the sort of

<sup>13</sup> Dawkins, *The selfish gene*, p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's dangerous idea* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 340.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Wright, *Non-zero: the logic of human destiny* (London: Vintage, 2001).

critical judgement by which we might decide that religion too is dangerous for our health. It produces, after all, inquisitions, witchcraft trials and religious wars.

Midgley voices a second objection which I think is likely to resonate even more with some critics. If we can explain any war by reference to a meme that successfully invades a population that has no immunity to it (the metaphor is telling), then do we not excuse ourselves from having to understand human psychology—people's intentions, nightmares and dreams? Do we not, however, need on the contrary to look into their hearts?<sup>17</sup> But is this a valid point? All memes evolve in human consciousness. 'Being involved in thinking', writes Dennett, is a meme's way of being tested by natural selection. It tries to have broad appeal.<sup>18</sup> War has had an enormous appeal over the centuries, but its appeal is clearly diminishing, even in terms of those aspects that for the philosopher and psychologist William James gave it its moral force, or its romance.

War appealed to so many for so long because it was considered heroic. Today we seem to have turned our back on heroism. It is not so much that we do not want our heroes to be what they seem; it is that circumstances seem to prevent them from being what they wish to become. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the word 'glory', a word which makes many of us distinctly uncomfortable. 'It will be a hopeless fight', wrote the Austrian chief of staff in his diary shortly before the First World War. 'Nevertheless it must be waged, since an old monarchy and a glorious army must not perish without glory.'<sup>19</sup> Churchill was to invoke glory again in 1940 in encouraging the British people not to surrender. There was a crucial difference, of course: he wanted them to fight on, not to go down gloriously in defeat—though I have little doubt that if that had been the final outcome Churchill himself would have considered it a fitting end to the national story. As the historian A. J. P. Taylor once famously remarked (not entirely ironically), Churchill was the price the British people paid for reading history.<sup>20</sup>

For glory to be part of the script, there had to be a narrative structure. Like any story, the history of a nation had to have a beginning, a middle and even an end. Today, war still persists, but it has now been recast as risk management. And it is still often fought for glory—except that the concept has been *instrumentalized*. Glory can mean different things: 'honour', 'worth', 'price' or 'estimate'. Like individuals, nations are still concerned with worth because value is intimately linked to authority, especially the authority of the state. If we take glory to mean 'fame' or 'renown', then it may indeed appear applicable only to the premodern era. If we understand it to mean 'deference', 'just due' or 'prestige', then it is still an important motive for going to war. For most of history war has been one of the principal instruments through which reputations have been won.

States may no longer fight to win status, but they do so to retain it. For with it goes something else which is central to power: honour. In our world honour

<sup>17</sup> Mary Midgley, *The myths we live by* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the spell*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, in 'The statesman', A. J. P. Taylor, ed., *Churchill: four faces and the man* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 56.

means ‘credibility’ (a word which was introduced into common parlance during the Cold War). If war has become risk management, what we are especially anxious to manage is anything that puts our credibility at risk.

What is important about credibility is that, like honour, it requires the recognition of others. Hobbes told us this three centuries ago: we want to be respected because respect is the currency of power. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, ‘an individual who sees himself through the eyes of others, has need of others for his existence, because the image he has of himself is indistinguishable from that presented to him by other people’.<sup>21</sup> In 1914, Russia’s honour required it to back Serbia; Austria’s required it to issue its ultimatum to the Serbian government. The rest, as they say, is history. In 1939, Britain’s honour required it to guarantee the borders of Poland even though it was in no position to defend them. Even in the Cold War, the credibility of the United States required that a ‘decent interval’ should follow the defeat of US forces in Vietnam. In pursuit of that end Nixon and Kissinger prolonged the war until they achieved ‘peace with honour’ in 1973, though the ‘interval’ between defeat and South Vietnam’s eventual fall did not last long.

Credibility is now the risk age’s word of choice. Elsewhere, more old-fashioned honour often requires that men inflict pain on others. Honour, in that sense, is a social bond, and winning it back a social obligation. In much of the world, moreover, the defence of honour is not confined to the present. It is shared with the ancestors with whom it is important to keep faith. Cultures of honour, adds Steven Pinker, spring up because they amplify human emotions like pride, anger and revenge, and because they reinforce solidarity, the clanship links or gang membership from which their members derive safety. They are often a sensible response to local conditions, whether in LA Central or Afghanistan. Honour represents a kind of social reality. It exists because everybody agrees it exists, and it must be constantly defended on a hair-trigger response because it is dangerous not to. To be risk-averse is to invite dishonour, which can be dangerous—as Hobbes tells us. On the streets of our own inner cities the commission of a homicide in revenge for a slight may even be an obligatory rite of passage into an adult world. ‘To turn the other cheek is not saintly, but stupid, or contemptibly weak.’<sup>22</sup>

In other words, two memes—honour and war—feed off what for Hobbes was one of the chief characteristics of the human race: its need for self-esteem. War will end—which is to say, we will have an immunity to it—only when we do indeed look into our hearts and discover that we no longer need to take revenge, or even to seek the esteem of others, at least on the terms only of our own choosing. One of the first writers to appreciate this was one of the great Scottish Enlightenment thinkers (albeit now a largely forgotten one), Lord Kames, for whom revenge was ‘the darling principle of human nature’. For him the power of retribution was the motivating force of history, and the civilizing principle was its transfer

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The sentiment of honour in Kabyle society’, quoted in J. G. Priestiany, ed., *Honour and shame: the values of Mediterranean society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966), p. 211, in Richard Sennett, *Respect: the formation of character in an age of inequality* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Pinker, *The blank slate: the modern denial of human nature* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 327.

from private to public hands. Gradually, the law had become the only legitimate avenger. 'There perhaps never was in government, a revolution of greater importance than this.' For, once they surrendered personal recourse to the *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation), people became aware for the first time not only of state authority but also of civil society. They became *social* beings as well as law-abiding ones. With all the confidence of an Enlightenment thinker, Kames even foresaw a time when civil society would polish its members to the point where no one would *want* to avenge themselves on those who had wronged them.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, we are a long way from that noble vision. Revenge is one of the principal themes of terrorism. People still wish to be avenged for slights (often less real than they imagine) and for humiliations to which they feel they have been subjected (including insults to the ancestors, for the contract with the dead is often stronger than that with the living). Dishonour is deeply felt. Whatever else distinguishes us as a species, self-loathing must be high on the list. Degradation matters. We are what Nietzsche called the 'beast with red cheeks', the only animal on the planet that can blush when it sees itself in the mirror. As Lichtenberg put it pithily, when looking into a mirror an ape should not expect to see an apostle staring back. That is why humiliation matters. Degradation is especially felt when it involves the body being subjected to pain: to constant bodily searches at Israeli security checkpoints on the West Bank or physical violations in Abu Ghraib. It is the potential to imagine our bodies transfigured in the next world into pure spirit, and yet disfigured in this, that makes us human. Our sense of indignity is the essence of dignity.

Today war has readapted again. Revenge is one of the most potent memes of all (keeping faith with the ancestors, with the community, with the faith). The cheap bomb—the suicide bomber—has lodged itself in our collective consciousness as one of the key tropes in the war on terror. Perhaps in the suicide bomber we see someone who lives more intensely, who overcomes the oblivion of death because it is only through killing that self-respect can be won back. It is through the measure of his sacrifice that the suicide bomber wins the respect of family and community. Then again, the motives may be more personal. Some suicide bombers are prepared to engage in the *ekstatis* of killing. We imagine that at the point of extinction others may experience a superabundance of life that flares up magnificently into a contempt of death. Ideologically, at least, suicide bombing is one way by which respect can be won *back*. In the western world this too is little recognized—but it should be, because it is a particularly tenacious meme: it encourages imitation; it is highly mimetic.

The conflicts of the future may arise between those who have found war to be zero-sum because of its risks and those who are willing to take risks to assert their identity, or earn a living. As Daniel Dennett writes, in the new world that Columbus opened up to European expansion it was European germs that brought to the brink of extinction local populations that had no immunity against them.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in J. M. Opal, 'Vengeance and civility: a new look at early American statecraft', *Journal of the Historical Society* 8: 1, March 2008, pp. 61–2.

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As a result they were almost entirely wiped out in the space of two generations. In the twenty-first century, it is memes, not genes, that may threaten the rest of us. Indeed, toxic memes are everywhere in the form of xenophobia, fundamentalism and religious fanaticism. In our own day false prophets and Messiahs still abound.<sup>24</sup>

States, too, want to take their own 'revenges'; and the United States just happens to be strong enough to seek revenge in the most ruthless manner. The original Enlightenment sponsors of America's bid for independence were inspired by Kames's story; they too believed revenge might one day wither. By the time of Andrew Jackson, the vision had largely vanished. Walter Russell Mead identifies 'assertive nationalism' as the Jacksonian tradition in American politics, and it has certainly been a prominent feature of the Bush years. It was Jackson, too, who was the first president to encourage Americans to turn to pistols, dirks and cane-swords to avenge insults themselves, and not to rely on the state. It was the 1820s generation that talked of the 'vindictive wrath of a justly defended and law-renewing community'.<sup>25</sup> Americans soon forgot the wise words of John Adams that they shouldn't think they were more virtuous than other people. 'Power always thinks it has great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak' (Madeleine Albright: 'We are the indispensable nation'); and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws (Albright: 'Multilateral if we can, unilateral if necessary').<sup>26</sup> My own concern is that recent practices, including 'extraordinary rendition' and the immunity granted to private security companies in Iraq, suggest that western 'market states' may be increasingly willing to contract out their revenge to others.<sup>27</sup>

## *Reconceptualizing war*

Meme theory is still in its infancy. I suspect it is unlikely to be widely accepted as demonstrably true. But then, does that really matter? Memes are useful not for their scientific merit alone but also for moral reasons: they encourage us to think in new ways. At one point Dawkins himself speaks of them simply as an analogy. Dennett, while making stronger claims for their scientific status, also adds that 'whether or not the meme perspective can be turned into science, in its philosophical guise it has already done much more good than harm'.<sup>28</sup> What good has it done? Let me make three claims.

First, it reminds us that our humanity is shared. Not only do we all feel pain, we all feel shame; war is a product of nature and nurture, and the enemy is not some alien 'other' that it is impossible to comprehend, let alone talk to. Memplexes are political realms. Whatever theory we come up with to explain the motivations

<sup>24</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the spell*, p. 304.

<sup>25</sup> Opal, 'Vengeance and civility', p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Andrew J. Bacevich, 'Illusions of managing history: the enduring relevance of Reinhold Niebuhr', *Historically Speaking* 10: 3, Jan.–Feb. 2008, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> On the market states, see Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and consent* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Midgley, *The myths we live by*, p. 68.

of terrorists, they will have to be engaged politically. We and they are not two different species inhabiting the same planet. Risk management may not be heroic but it is sensible; it allows us to buy time until some of the most intractable actors can be folded back into the political process.

For what a truly *depoliticized* discourse might look like—that is, one in which common humanity cannot be assumed—we must turn to science fiction. Let me cite an episode from *Star Trek: the next generation*, in which the captain of the *Enterprise*, Jean-Luc Picard, debates his fate with the Borg Collective. The Borg is a collective entity in which all individuality has been repressed and everybody works for the good of the whole. It represents everything humanity is not. It is the ultimate alien, writes Adam Roberts, the true ‘other’, because it is not even worth considering what makes for its ‘otherness’.

The Federation which Picard represents is centred on one planet—the Earth (Sector 001 in the series). It is also metaphorically centred on core human values and beliefs which are still at the heart of our concept of self. The Borg, by contrast, have no centre, no purpose or sense of meaning. ‘They have neither honour nor courage,’ complains the Klingon warrior Worf. They are a meme-less just as they are a gene-less community, as Picard finds out for himself after he is captured.

*Picard*: I will resist you to my last ounce of strength.

*Borg*: Strength is irrelevant. Resistance is futile—your culture will adapt to serve as ours.

*Picard*: Impossible! My culture is based on freedom and self-determination.

*Borg*: Freedom is irrelevant. Self-determination is irrelevant. You must comply.

*Picard*: We would rather die.

*Borg*: Death is irrelevant.

The text is pretty banal—especially when it appears on the printed page—but the importance of the exchange lies in the total ‘otherness’ of the enemy. For the Borg do not claim that they are stronger than the Federation. They simply say, ‘Strength is irrelevant.’ They do not have different values; they have no values that we would recognize as human. They do not say, ‘Your strength is insufficient’, which would actually mean, by implication, ‘We value our superior strength.’ Instead, they insist that strength does not figure or compute. And they do not value life because they cannot imagine the concept of sacrifice, which is why for them death really is irrelevant. It doesn’t ‘compute’. Picard, concludes Roberts, cannot enter imaginatively into their world any more than they can enter into his. There can be no exchange and no negotiation.<sup>29</sup>

It is impossible to imagine such a dialogue between a hostage and a hostage-taker in Beirut in 1983, still less between a suicide bomber and his intended target in Israel today, should the former survive to be interrogated. Today’s world sees a clash of wills involving different understandings of sacrifice, different meanings of death, as well as different concepts of honour, both of them reflecting the meme

<sup>29</sup> Adam Roberts, *Science fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 166–7.

of revenge. We live in a dangerous and deeply divided world, but it is still one that is recognizably human. What makes it a human world is that it is mimetic—imitation (in particular the reciprocal imitation of desire), not originality, is the definitive mark of our species. Recent scientific exploration of imitation (such as the research of Vittorio Gallese and Giacomo Rizzolatti on ‘mirror neurons’) suggests that imitative behaviour is about to become a new paradigm in the behavioural sciences.<sup>30</sup> And never before has imitation been encouraged so much, and so quickly, as it has been through new technologies such as the internet, television and cellphone cameras. Ours is a deeply imitative age.

Second, meme theory encourages us to remember that war has its own logic. Clausewitz described war as a chameleon which incessantly adapts itself to existing conditions. One of the memes explored by Susan Blackmore in her book *The meme machine* is very specific to our post-modern times: abduction by aliens. It used to be highly competitive in the meme pool—by the end of the 1990s 3.7 million Americans claimed to have been abducted. A mimetic approach, she insists, provides the most likely explanation for the phenomenon. Many people suffer without knowing it from sleep paralysis. Some wake up, apparently, convinced that they have been abducted. *X-Files* conspiracy theories have made this meme especially tenacious. It was difficult to challenge because the aliens were considered skilled in inducing amnesia and leaving behind few, if any, physical traces of their presence. And governments, if they knew about it, were not telling. It was a particularly successful meme because it provided an explanation for an unpleasant physical experience. It had great appeal, especially in Middle America, which had long been seized by conspiracy theories, beginning with another insidious threat, communism, in the 1950s.<sup>31</sup>

But every conspiracy theory burns itself out in the end. Over time it becomes less contagious. In the wake of 9/11 it seems to have been replaced by a different fear, that of terrorism. Indeed, alien abduction stories ceased to hit the news virtually overnight. UFO magazines have gone out of circulation. Aliens have disappeared from the collective imagination, as have the websites devoted to monitoring them. More immediate threats are now at hand.

But we should be in no doubt that the strongest memes survive for a reason: they appeal to the imagination. Writing four years before 9/11, Bryan Appleyard explained the ubiquity of the abduction meme in the conclusion to a book, *Aliens: why they are here*. Aliens were here, he maintained, whether real or demonic, or both at the same time. He confessed that in the course of writing the book he had moved from scepticism to belief and finally to acceptance. He had come to accept belief in alien abduction for what it was—an essential expression of our continued longing for metaphysical meaning, even though we live in risk-averse,

<sup>30</sup> Rene Girard, *Evolution and conversion: dialogues of the origins of culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 4. Thomas Kuhn makes the same point about science when he says that we have overvalued originality here too. Kuhn gives the name ‘normal science’ to the limited work which proceeds according to pre-set plans without raising new questions. In Kuhn’s thinking, original thinking is an abnormal activity for scientists. It is not what science is ‘about’.

<sup>31</sup> Blackmore, *The meme machine*, pp. 176–8.

post-heroic times. It was ultimately a manifestation of our need for monsters—and, of course, saviours waiting in the wings. His cultural explanation may ring true for those outside looking in at the western obsession with terrorism. For it, too, at times seems to express a yearning for a metaphysical reality, as well as to tap into an obsession with conspiracies, and to capture a profound concern about the vulnerability of the societies we have become.<sup>32</sup> Terrorism, of course, is real—there is nothing more real than getting blown up—but it is also subjective. For we see terrorism as a ‘scourge’, a ‘plague’, an exogenous or endogenous reality. Some prefer to treat it as a force of nature.

All our popular obsessions, writes Harold Bloom, including alien abduction and near-death experience, testify to our expectation of release from the burdens of a society that is weary with its sense of belatedness or ‘aftering’—the fear that we have somehow arrived after the main event.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps our own age is one that we find so boring that many of us aspire unconsciously to transcend it—in defiance of the old Chinese curse about living in interesting times. Our deep fears and neuroses may even be the collectively unwilled expression of a generalized condition, the manifestation of an unexpressed yearning to move beyond an age of risk into something more heroic. The war on terror is merely the latest manifestation of a human need—to be fearful of something that transcends the everyday.

Finally, meme theory is useful in illustrating one other reality. There are no Kantian solutions (democratic peace theory) or magic bullets that will bring war to an end. For war must not be seen in isolation. Hence the importance of the memeplex. Midgley herself makes this point when discussing genes. We cannot eliminate war through genetic means by targeting, for example, the gene for aggression. That such a gene exists, she has no doubt. There is good evidence, after all, that there is a centre of the brain specifically concerned with it. But a gene should never be seen in isolation. Our capacity for anger is deeply interwoven with our capacity for fear, love, respect and contempt. The clue to ending aggression is not genetic engineering; it is to extend the sympathies we feel to a circle wider than our immediate family, our tribe, our community or even our nation. It is to be less fearful of the ‘other’; more charitable to strangers, more respectful of other peoples’ customs, and less contemptuous of the mores of ‘tribes’ other than our own.<sup>34</sup>

War, in the end, is only a means, it is not an end in itself. Most states now practise it in the name of peace; many non-state actors pursue it as a way to revenge themselves on others. For many terrorists, it is the means that count most (which makes it an end in itself, a fatal contradiction in terms). This is why all conventions to ban war are useless in the absence of any wider ‘civilizing process’ at work which might predispose us not to harm the people who harm us, or to insist on defending our own honour come what may. If this is not a very optimistic note on which to conclude, so be it.

<sup>32</sup> Bryan Appleyard, *Aliens: why they are here* (London: Scribner, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Appleyard, *Aliens*, p. 295.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a religion: strange hopes and even stranger fears* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 61.