

War in the Paleolithic era: for a long time, a vague idea

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Abstract: War is somewhat similar to the symbolic thinking of our prehistoric ancestors: the range of interpretations produced on the subject often reveals more about the ideology of prehistorians than about the archaeological basis for its existence... Whether war is refuted in Paleolithic times (in order to better emphasize the supposedly inherent violence of Neolithic societies) or, on the contrary, defended as an inherent trait of human behavior since the origins of our lineage, the resulting perspectives are highly instructive regarding the evolution of our understanding of these societies and their actors. In any case, the main lesson to be drawn from the examination of a series of texts drawn from prehistoric literature between the 1860s to the 1950s is that the evocation of war in the Paleolithic era, although often put forward, remained a vague idea for a long time. This was due both to the absence of any genuine investigation into the evidence for this practice and to a lack of consideration of the consequences of its supposed existence for understanding the societies of this period.

Keywords: Historiography, Paleolithic war, Inconsistent paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

As a child of the 1970s, and later a student of teachers for whom the theme of conflict in prehistory was not really a topic, I admit that I have never taken a particular interest in the question of war in nomadic hunter-gatherer societies of the European Paleolithic era. And should any students from Toulouse happen to read these lines, they will readily confirm that this subject is virtually absent from my lectures. Thus, when the organizers of this conference approached me, I wondered what I could possibly contribute on a subject whose historiography I knew only very superficially.

However, we must admit that this topic, which has been fueled over the past two decades by a significant body of scientific literature, is now in the spotlight, even if it concerns Neolithic societies much more than Paleolithic ones (Guilaine and Zammit, 2001; Baray et al., 2011; Dias-Meirinho, 2011; Patou-Mathis, 2013; Demoule, 2017; Lehöerff, 2018). In the same interpretative vein, and this time fully embracing the millennia of ancient prehistory, we should also mention the work carried out on this subject by J.-C. Favin Lévêque (2020), from whom I will borrow part of the documentary record. I will limit myself here to French-language publications, while emphasizing the importance, nearly 30 years ago,

of the publication of L. H. Keeley’s book, *War before civilization*, which greatly contributed to raising awareness of this topic (Keeley, 1996). It should also be added that this theme has recently been further explored through reflections on anthropophagy in certain Paleolithic contexts, the finest example of which is provided by the study conducted by B. Boulestin and D. Henry-Gambier on testimonies from the Upper Paleolithic (Boulestin and Henry-Gambier, 2019). Not to mention the anthropology of P. Clastres (1977), which has been used to discuss the possible martial purpose of certain types of weapons in even earlier contexts (Metz, 2015, pp. 183–185).

This survey of examples shows that the question of whether interhuman violence may or may not have been a driving force in the structuring or even evolution of Palaeolithic societies is currently under discussion in several recent studies, helping to guide the interpretation of certain archaeological facts. This perspective tends, for example, to fuel hypotheses about the territorial strategies of the populations of that time, their funerary practices or, more broadly, their treatment of corpses, such as the technological development of some of their equipment potentially dedicated to warfare. In the following lines, however, I will not seek to enter into this field of current debate. Following a more strictly historiographical approach, I will ask whether, ultimately, and even if we have not been able to draw all the conclusions from it before, this consi-

deration about the place of violence is so new in itself. In other words, is the introduction of this theme really recent, or was the existence of conflict in Palaeolithic prehistory previously tacitly accepted without any attempt to explore its meaning, motivations and consequences? To answer this question, I will focus on references gleaned from prehistoric literature from the 1860s to the 1950s, limiting myself to the context of French research.

GOOD SAVAGE OR ANCESTRAL BEAST? (or how the Hobbes/Rousseau opposition is replayed in a rather caricatural way)

Even before the first archaeological discoveries began, in the mid-nineteenth century, to bring these ancient population—soon to be labeled 'Palaeolithic' (Lubbock, 1865)—into clearer view, the verdict had already been established: these were our prehistoric ancestors, surviving in a hostile natural world, overcoming its dangers only thanks to their (albeit primitive) cunning and their (clearly rudimentary) weapons. But were they truly hostile toward one another? Is conflict with our own kind part of human nature? G. de Mortillet (1821–1898) didn't think so. In a distinctly Rousseauist spirit—and especially in line with his broader aim to show that the flaws of humanity stem from the relatively recent invention of religion, rather than from any innate tendency—he concluded: "These men, few in number, had no need to fight among themselves; war was unknown to them. Without religious ideas, no wild fears disturbed or perverted their imagination" (Mortillet, 1883, p. 601).

This opinion, influential as it may have been judging by the aura surrounding its author at his time, was however not unanimously shared. Several of his contemporaries, particularly Christian authors, on the contrary emphasized on the inherent violence of humanity, as illustrated by these quotations from the Marquis de Nadaillac (1818–1904) and A. de Quatrefages (1810–1892): "Struggle and war, need we repeat, have always been the sad prerogative of humanity; our brilliant civilisation has been unable, as we know only too well, to avoid them; during those barbaric times known as the Stone Age, they were the normal and, so to speak, necessary state of affairs. But our ancestors were not content with killing their enemies; they fed on the flesh of the vanquished, and numerous facts leave little room for doubt that the first inhabitants of Europe were in no way inferior in this regard to the cannibals whose hideous feasts are still recounted by travellers today" (Nadaillac, 1881, p. 206).

"The hunter, by virtue of his fighting habits, will inevitably be a warrior; war is basically just a manhunt. For him, any dispute over hunting grounds will easily turn into war, because it is a matter of survival. This war will be merciless, because any prisoner is not only useless to him, but harmful; he is a mouth to feed. The hunter will kill him; and if passion on the one side and self-love on the other come into play, he will put him to death with heroic fortitude" (Quatrefages, 1877, p. 331).

The evidence of war is also highlighted by several other authors of the time to explain the presence of bone injuries on certain human remains, as illustrated by this quote from P. Broca (1824–1880) commenting on his observation of Cro-Magnon fossils (Dordogne) as follows: "The inhabitants of Les Eyzies appear to us as a violent people, for while the old man's wound may have been nothing more than a hunting accident, the woman's was clearly inflicted by a murderous hand" (Broca, 1868, pp. 356–357).

A few years later, É. Piette (1827–1906) offered us his own painting of the violence believed to have prevailed at that time, based on the discovery of skull fragments during his excavations in the Gourdan cave (Haute-Garonne): "It is therefore clear that these remains are those of individuals killed in the fields, whose heads were brought back to the cave by the hunters of Gourdan. It is likely that when a foreign tribe or a few isolated individuals came to their hunting grounds, they fought them to remain the sole owners of the valley, which was teeming with game. If they killed one of their opponents, they cut off his head and brought it back to the cave as a trophy. There, it was scalped and its contents eaten. Perhaps, without even eating the contents [the author seems to have little appetite for cannibalism], they threw the scalped skulls into the rubbish heap, where they were soon broken by the feet of those who came and went" (Piette, 1873, p. 408).

However, during these same decades at the end of the 19th century, the staging of conflicts between Palaeolithic human societies remained discreet or even absent in many other writings. For example, among the contributions to the collective work entitled *L'Homme fossile en France* ("Fossil man in France"), co-authored by several pioneers in the field of prehistoric studies, this theme does not appear; if weapons are described, and when their supposed function is mentioned, they are always associated with hunting (Boucher de Perthes et al., 1864). This is made clear by one of these authors, J. Boucher de Perthes (1788–1868), when he writes in another contemporary work: "Everything indicates that the state of war dates back to the earliest days of human existence, but it was war between one species and another, and fratricidal murders were isolated cases. Humans were not numerous enough to have to fight over land [...]. Man, living in tribes separated by vast expanses of wilderness, was not at war with man. [Thanks to his weapons, he was soon] no longer exposed to threats from other species that had reason to fear him; he lived in peace: it was the golden age of barbarism" (Boucher de Perthes, 1864, pp. 441–442).

In the same vein, in his comprehensive work published 25 years later, and despite the fact that knowledge had greatly advanced in the meantime, É. Cartailhac (1845–1921) made no mention of this: there is no explicit reference to conflicts during the Palaeolithic era, while the array of weapons associated with this period, particularly the 'Reindeer Age', is still systematically linked to hunting (Cartailhac, 1889). It is therefore quite logical that, in the same years, popular works did not echo this view, such as *L'Homme primitif* by L. Figuier (1819–1894), which was widely read and helped to build a prehistoric

imagination among the general public (Figuier, 1873): the struggle for survival of these ancestral humans, abundantly illustrated in an epic manner, is resolutely directed against frightening wild animals, not against their fellow humans. It should be noted that the recognition of the first works of portable art does not contradict this fact, quite the contrary: while these artistic creations were interpreted quite literally at the time, there are no motifs illustrating any scenes of conflict.

WHAT, THEN, IS THE SITUATION REGARDING THE “STRUGGLE FOR LIFE”?

One might rightly consider that this relative absence of violent competition contradicts a model that was nevertheless prevalent at the time, theorised by C. Darwin (1809–1882), that of the “struggle for life” (Darwin, 1859)—especially when this principle is established as the driving force behind the evolution of not only animal but also human populations, contributing to the development of what would soon be called ‘social Darwinism’. This perspective applied to humanity—which, as we shall see, is far removed from Darwin’s thinking—was in fact defended by several anthropologists of the time, such as P. Topinard (1830–1911) when he wrote: “Of all [the causes determining the evolution of societies], the one that ranks first, that must be addressed immediately and that has the greatest impact on all the others, is the competition for the most extensive and most remunerative life, so wonderfully described by Darwin in all beings, from which man in the social state is no more exempt than man in the state of nature, and which, in its most violent form, is precisely militarism [...]. Darwin’s struggle takes two forms in societies: one external, between rival societies, and the other internal, between the constituent elements of society” (Topinard, 1900, p. 206).

This view differs from Darwin’s because, for him, the competition for life expressed in his theory of natural selection seems to play a much smaller role in humans than sexual selection (Darwin, 1871). This led to the importance attached to the control of women by men, which could certainly lead to competition between men to achieve this, but not to the existence of widespread conflict. This is, in a way, the view found in one of the theorists of that period on the role of war in human societies, C. Letourneau (1831–1902), when he refers to prehistoric times on the basis of ethnographic comparison: “[...] It would be a calumny to represent primitive peoples as savages, hungry for human flesh and constantly waging war to obtain it [...]. It can even be inferred that, at the very origins of human societies, clans were rather peaceful and that their wars were of a legal nature. This is still the most common form of armed conflict in Australia today [...]. Among small savage societies, the wrongs suffered by some and inflicted by others are most often individual attacks: violations of hunting territory, abduc-

tions of women, in short, crimes motivated by hunger or love [...]. [It is the repetition of these reprisals that] eventually creates in the primitive mind a taste, a habit, a need for war, which grows disproportionately in the course of social evolution. The first clans only had to defend their gathering, fishing or hunting territories; they only had to protect their own kin. As long as this primitive state of affairs persisted, war could not enrich the victor: there was nothing to plunder. [...] When people became herders or farmers, these customs changed. Then we saw the first raids to steal livestock, crops, tools, etc.; war lost all legal appearance; theft became its main purpose” (Letourneau, 1895, pp. 529–530).

To illustrate how minor a role the theme of prehistoric warfare played at that time (taking the period 1890–1900 as an example), it should be noted that Letourneau’s text is the only one to elicit a response on this subject in the then leading journal in the field of prehistory, *L’Anthropologie*, through a review of his work published in the 1895 issue by one of the journal’s editors, R. Verneau (1852–1938). Apart from this, although the theme appears in several ethnographic articles in the same journal (see Favin-L’Evêque, 2020, pp. 101–150), it is virtually absent from the writings of prehistorians in the strict sense.

AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY: ARE MIGRATIONS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT?

The first decades of the 20th century were marked by a major shift in interpretation. Instead of the gradual—and universal—evolution previously advocated by Mortillet, a perspective shared by many prehistorians, a new vision emerged, based on population movements that introduced numerous disruptions in the course of prehistoric times. This theme fuelled the famous “Aurignacian debate” (Dubois and Bon, 2006), which saw the sudden emergence in Europe of peoples arriving from elsewhere, settling in territories that previously had been occupied by ancient indigenous populations. This is the meaning of the break introduced between the ‘Early Palaeolithic’, whose last authors were Neanderthals forging the Mousterian culture, and the newly defined ‘Upper Palaeolithic’, inaugurated by the Aurignacian culture, attributed to modern humanity, specifically Cro-Magnon. In doing so, spatial dynamics combine with chronological ones to give rise to the notion of “prehistoric cultures” and, potentially, ethnic groups, as M. Boule (1861–1942) later summarised: “[The Upper Palaeolithic] presents a set of characteristics that give it great unity and mark a considerable advance over the [Mousterian] world. There is also a real contrast between the people of the old and new Palaeolithic! The discovery of human skeletons now brings us face to face with truly superior types. Most have a more elegant body, a finer head, and a straight, broad forehead. They left behind in the caves they inhabited so much evidence of their manual dexterity, their inventive

spirit, their artistic and religious concerns, and their capacity for abstraction that they truly deserve the glorious title of *Homo sapiens*! [...] We have reached a point at which the physical evolution of humanity can be considered complete; the question of human origins loses its zoological character and becomes purely anthropological and ethnographic” (Boule, 1921, pp. 247–248).

One of the main protagonists of this interpretative shift was H. Breuil (1877–1961), supported by a few prehistorians from the previous generation who had broken away from the ‘Mortillet school’ (starting with Cartailhac) and, above all, by younger scholars who defended the existence of the Upper Palaeolithic alongside him (among whom we will soon find Denis Peyrony). In the text devoted to the invention of this period, in the midst of a meticulous presentation of the industrial, geographical and stratigraphic data on which he bases his conclusions, Breuil explains some of the foundations of his vision of the evolution of human societies, in which the possible role of conflict is introduced as follows: “It is becoming increasingly clear that what was initially thought to be a continuous series, due to the evolution of a single population in one place, is in fact the result of successive collaboration between numerous tribes reacting to each other to varying degrees, either through purely industrial or commercial influence, or through the gradual infiltration or sudden and violent invasion of foreign tribes” (Breuil, 1913, pp. 169; quoted *in full* by Boule, 1921, p. 252).

Thus, the evocation of prehistoric warfare emerges as a driving force for change in Breuil’s new vision of the dynamics at work during the transition from the Early Palaeolithic to the Upper Palaeolithic. However, he does not seem to analyse the consequences of this idea, and even in the context of industrial transformation, the role of weapons is always mentioned in terms of their use for hunting, rather than as martial equipment. This oversight in most of his work is all the more interesting to note given that, conversely, H. Breuil seems to have held fast to the idea that the arrival of Upper Palaeolithic populations must have been accompanied by violence, as he expressed with R. Lantier (1886–1980) in the only handbook he wrote, towards the end of his life: “Their arrival in Europe constitutes, from a racial point of view, an event of great importance, unique in the history of humanity: the substitution, probably violent, of Neanthropic humanity replacing the Paleoanthropic one, which was completely destroyed by the invaders” (Breuil and Lantier, 1951, p. 161).

The theme of migration that occurred during the Palaeolithic Prehistory was therefore accompanied, in the minds of the proponents of this interpretation, by the necessary use of interhuman violence, or at least by territorial competition. This was also portrayed by a leading ‘migrationist’, D. Peyrony (1869–1954), when he recounts the clashes that he believed took place throughout the first millennia of the Upper Palaeolithic between competing ethnic groups or ‘races’ fighting for possession of the fertile Dordogne region, namely the Aurignacians (also known as Cro-Magnons) and the Périgordians (also known as Combe-Capelle): “The arrival of Cro-Magnon man invading the

region forced the occupants to regroup and retreat, apparently towards the east to the ‘Bos del Ser’ [in Corrèze]. The victors settled comfortably at Roc de Combe-Capelle, La Ferrassie, La Faurelie, in the commune of Mauzens-Miremont, in the shelters of Poisson, Lartet, Pasquet, Cro-Magnon, La Combe, in the commune of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac [etc.]” (Peyrony, 1933, pp. 556–557).

D. Peyrony, more than H. Breuil, draws some conclusions about the evolution of industries, associating certain points with weapons used not only for hunting but also for fighting enemies. But like H. Breuil, he does not devote any real investigation to this, as he could have done by weighing up, for example, the arguments for and against the existence of conflicts based on human remains or figurative art. In short, here again, while conflict seems self-evident, to the point where it is not even worth demonstrating, its archaeological consequences are virtually overlooked.

As proof, it is interesting to consult a volume published by H. Breuil a few years later, in 1949, which consists of 31 figurative scenes, drawn by him and each accompanied by a commentary in his own hand, intended to reflect (somewhat naively, it must be said) prehistory as he knew it on several continents (Africa, Asia, Europe) None of them depict any interhuman conflict, while scenes of hunting battles abound. There is only one exception: figure 26, supposed to represent rock art in the Spanish Levant, shows a painting of a human figure armed with a bow running after one of his fellow humans (Breuil, 1949, pp. 84–85). It should be noted that H. Breuil defended the attribution of this artistic production to the Late Palaeolithic, now linked to the Neolithic (Lopez-Montalvo, 2011). But even in this image, the scenes of life surrounding the painted rock show us anything but a depiction of war, with everyone going about their daily business, peacefully for the women gathered in a camp, more energetically for the men hunting deer or wild boar, and even acrobatically for the honey gatherers surrounded by a swarm of wild bees...

THE PALAEO-LITHIC WAR: THE STORY OF A MISSED ENCOUNTER, OR THE UNDERPINNINGS OF A VAGUE IDEA

What emerges from this brief review of texts— even if it must be acknowledged that it provides little more than the basis for a preliminary investigation, which would be interesting to pursue for the second half of the 20th century, before war in prehistory became the subject of several works, as mentioned above? Firstly, it appears that the idea of Paleolithic warfare, although relativized or even denounced by some authors, was nevertheless fairly common in the minds of prehistorians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was sometimes motivated by a sinister human atavism for violence—like many representatives of the animal kingdom, immersed in a fight to the death for survival—and sometimes rende-

red inevitable by the supposed need to control women, or even by episodes of territorial competition.

However, it should be emphasised that the imagination of French prehistorians at the end of the 19th century regarding Palaeolithic warfare, when mobilised according to the motifs mentioned above, was closely inspired by the numerous ethnographic cases known at the time. Under the guise of the populations of the 'reindeer age', it is not difficult to recognise the American Iroquois or the Australian Aborigines, to whom explicit reference is often made, as we have seen, for example, in the writings of C. Letourneau. This observation is all the more important because it explains why, when the dialogue between prehistory and ethnography became less close in the first half of the 20th century, or at least when these already old references disappeared more or less from the libraries of both prehistorians and ethnologists, this view of the role of 'primitive warfare' tended to fade. In French ethnology, it was not until the 1970s and the work of P. Clastres, already mentioned, that a line of thinking emphasising its importance re-emerged. However, it must be admitted that, in the same years, this perspective was modestly received by contemporary prehistorians. It is interesting to note that P. Clastres criticises the views of A. Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986), who was then a leading authority on French prehistory and also an ethnologist by training. A. Leroi-Gourhan conceived of conflict in the Palaeolithic era as, at best, an avatar of the violence inherent in hunting, while war proper, a subject to which he devoted little attention and which he restricted to economic predation, remained the preserve of Neolithic societies, as summarised in these passages from one of his most famous texts, *Le geste et la parole*: "Throughout history, aggression has appeared as a technique fundamentally linked to acquisition, and in primitive societies its initial role was in hunting, where aggression and food acquisition were intertwined [...]. Between hunting and its counterpart, war, a subtle assimilation gradually takes place as both become concentrated in a class born of the new [agro-pastoral] economy, that of men-at-arms. [...] In summary,] agricultural man remains trapped in the same shell as in the dark ages of mammoth slaughter, but the shift in the economic system that makes him a producer of resources also makes him, in turn, both hunter and prey" (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964, pp. 236–237).

But let us return to the period I have focused on in this brief historiographical overview. The portrayal of war in the Palaeolithic era, as proposed by authors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, therefore seems to be based more on philosophical grounds, or simply inspired by an imaginary notion of the supposed barbarism of those savage ages, fuelled by ethnographic references, rather than being based on genuine research dedicated to identifying archaeological traces of this practice. It should be noted that the same is true of authors who, on the contrary, refute the existence of war in those distant times: here again, archaeological arguments give way to unsubstantiated considerations, whether it be the demographics of the populations of that time, supposedly too

small to make conflict necessary in their eyes, or the absence of religious motivations, bordering on a description of a "noble savage" devoid of violent impulses inspired by the irrational.

Thus, whether authors have defended or contested the existence of conflicts during early prehistory, Palaeolithic warfare remains a vague idea, for several reasons. Firstly, no author really bothers to argue their position on an archaeologically established basis; secondly, even among those who recognise its existence, none really draw any conclusions about the organisation and evolution of societies that were supposedly immersed in systemic violence. The evocation of Palaeolithic warfare, when put forward, therefore remains a paradigm that is not really sought to be proven and, what is more, one from which all the consequences are not drawn. This is what I mean by the expression "vague idea": a perspective left halfway between proof and the implications it suggests. Admittedly, this is quite common in prehistoric literature. For example, when the religiosity of Palaeolithic populations was finally put forward at the beginning of the 20th century, after the recognition of 'parietal sanctuaries' and the emergence of a procession of "priests", 'sorcerers' or 'magicians' automatically accompanied it, little effort was made to consider the extent to which the emergence of political and religious structures may have influenced the construction of Upper Palaeolithic societies.

What more can be said about the story of this missed encounter between early prehistorians and the idea of war in the Palaeolithic era? Simply add that, ultimately, the only author of that era who permanently embedded this theme in our imagination and made it a subject in its own right was Rosny aîné, alias J. H. H. Boex (1856–1940), through his famous serialised novel published from 1909, *La guerre du feu* (Rosny aîné, 1911). And yet, we must acknowledge that the reception of this work by—who were keen to criticise its archaeological basis—owes much to its 1981 film adaptation by Jean-Jacques Annaud. The film sparked much debate, weighing up the merits of this evocation of prehistory and highlighting its extravagance. Be that as it may, this epic fiction remains an emotional memory for many of its viewers—including the teenager that I was! But fortunately, it is fiction (good news for the Neanderthals), not a documentary...

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DISCUSSION

Jean-Marc Pétilon: I have three brief comments. Regarding your question about weapons of war, I am not aware of any explicit description support that idea. In the period you mentioned, objects, most often made of bone, are sometimes found in the literature and described as “daggers” or “clubs”, which are weapons that one can hardly imagine being used in a hunting context. But as far as I know, this is not explicitly stated. There is no elaboration on how they may have been used, but the words used refer more to weapons of war than to hunting weapons. These identifications are often very questionable. When we look at these items today, we are not inclined to support that interpretation, but it’s the only evidence I can see.

On the topic of cannibalism, I’m just going to make a short connection between two points you raised. You mentioned the Marquis de Nadaillac, who repeated the idea of ancient conflicts and added cannibalism, saying: “We unfortunately have too many clues that show that...” I wonder if what he was partly thinking about what É. Piette observed. They are contemporaries, they are from the same area – the Marquis de Nadaillac works also in the Pyrenees. When he says that, I wonder if what he has in mind, even if he doesn’t say it explicitly, refers to those cannibalized human remains that people were starting to discover at that time, among other places in the Pyrenean caves excavated by É. Piette and well known to the Marquis de Nadaillac.

And one last point. When you say: “These practices are discussed, but without drawing any conclusions”, what is surprising is that even today, apart from D. Henry-Gambier and B. Boulestin on the Placard site, some colleagues study these ensembles with the same aporia. There are other sites like Gough Cave which, from an anthropological perspective, are very similar to Le Placard. These have always been published as funeral practices, as things that are done to the corpse, without ever raising the question of conflicts. So, I do not know if this is a refusal to address the issue or simply a blind spot in our thinking, but I think that the situation you were describing regarding cannibalism is still common today, with the exception of B. Boulestin, D. Henry-Gambier and perhaps a few others.

Christophe Darmangeat: I have a question that is a bit outside the scope of your talk, but I’m also asking it, because it’s something that has been on my mind for a long time and for which I have never really found an answer. It seems to me that up until around the Second World War—this is more an ethnologist’s approach than a prehistorian’s— it was generally accepted that hunter-gatherers could be violent and that they could fight ferociously. I am speaking especially about the Marxist movement, which I know quite well, but I think it is true for all of what we might call progressives. F. Engels, G. Plekhanov, the founding fathers of Marxism, said that

hunter-gatherers waged war on each other. They even said that they did it more harshly than the societies that followed, because, exactly as you mentioned, they had no interest in taking prisoners. Even M. Mead, in the early 1940s, wrote that while some hunter-gatherers did not wage war, others did, for example the Australians. And then, from the post-war period onwards, all this became “pacified”. The idea that war only appeared much later, with the Neolithic period or after, became obvious (but that is false certainty!). But I don’t know of any book that really argued in this direction. It seems like that this idea just became accepted, without any discussion along the lines of, “We thought something that was wrong for some reason, and that’s why we have to change our minds.” Is it because I am unaware of things that have been written, which is quite possible? Or has this change in opinion really happened quietly, without any open debate? Does anyone have any information on this point?

François Bon: I think you’re absolutely right. I would tend to think that, perhaps not explicitly or even consciously—but this is somewhat in line with my initial position—suggesting after the Second World War that humanity is inherently violent is a philosophically heavy claim. We are really careful to this kind of thing and, as a result, we tend to avoid the question. That’s how I see it. I haven’t dealt with A. Leroi-Gourhan’s work on the 1950s period, but it’s something like that. The theme of conflict appears at times, but quickly he dismisses it, basically saying that conflict is just an extension of hunting for resources. In fact, he does not address the theme of conflict as a possible significant human and sociological reality. Conflict is mentioned, but as far as I know, it is not a central theme in A. Leroi-Gourhan’s work. And I tend to think that it was dismissed because it was too heavy a subject at the time. And it is symptomatic that this theme is resurfacing today.

Sylvain Lemoine: You started by saying that you haven’t looked at the Anglo-Saxon literature, but in a few words, what is its approach? Is it different from the French approach?

F. B.: I am unable to answer because my vision is too limited. I’m sorry. Does anyone have a more complete perspective?

J.-M. P.: It wasn’t about this topic, but rather a comment in line with Christophe [Darmangeat]’s question and your answer. There is an exception in this post-World War II field: P. Clastres, who really emphasizes war among hunter-gatherers with a very political interpretation (war as resistance to the formation of the State). He also explicitly criticizes A. Leroi-Gourhan’s position. P. Clastres reviews what prehistorians have written on the subject, noting war does not need to be discussed, since it is nothing more than [man]hunting. P. Clastres, of course, completely rejects this view.