

Why We Fight, by Mike Martin, London: Hurst & Company, 2018, £20.00, pp. 311

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Desire (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), attachment (*moha*) and ego (*ahankar*) are the five basic causes of human irrationality. In violence, one of the most significant human irrationality, intertwined strands of all these five factors can be seen. In *Why We Fight*, Mike Martin, a soldier and scholar, goes beyond these five tenets to look at the root cause of violence in societies. He attempts to describe connections between individuals and their social behaviour. The book's focus is on the small subsection of human traits that lie at the intersection of attachment and ego, which Martin has referred to as status and belongingness. He further examines the correlation between status and belongingness as the root cause of violence in general, and terrorism in particular, from biological and cognitive perspectives. This goes against the prevalent perception about ideology as the backbone of violence, with specific references to conflicts in western Asia from Afghanistan to Syria.

The book is structured to convey its central theme that desire for status and belongingness is the trigger for human violence succinctly. Martin explains how belonging to a group and subsequently acquiring higher status in the group results in maximising of the resources available and increases the mating opportunities for the individual. It is to ensure this status and belongingness that people continue to voluntarily sign up for war, even when on an individual scale it minimises the person's

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chances of survival, which is the essence of evolution and the basis of our decisions. The desire, or zest, to fight has not yet been removed from our genetic makeup, despite the clear disadvantages it poses to an individual's reproductive health and survival. Martin believes this to be a result of the several advantages provided by genetic tendency to our ancestors; their ability to fight for their group resulted in greater resources and better overall group welfare.

Although the book is divided into 12 chapters, apart from the 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion', it is easy to see it as three distinct sections. The evolution of the human mind from a biological perspective is discussed in the introductory part. With his academic background in biology, Martin brings home the point in a very sophisticated manner without resorting to complicated scientific terminologies. Thereafter, the first section looks at drivers for human brain evolution, including subconscious, competition, status and belongingness. It gives a detailed analysis of various factors that have shaped the human brain. The second section analyses the frameworks for analysing and justifying violence with a conscious and reasoning brain, moral codes, beliefs in the supernatural and ideologies. This section explains how humans intellectually justify their actions initiated in their subconscious, controlled by their desire for status and belongingness. The final section concludes with some reflections of the past and likely future trajectory of human groupings in the era of the Internet and virtual social platforms.

Moulding of thoughts, as a result of genetics and environment, is the central theme of the evolution of the human mind. Analysis of twins brings home a point about the role of genetics in how people think, and includes intelligence, religiosity, trust and political leanings. The evolutionary changes in the human brain are a result of choices made by individuals rather than at a group level. The current state of the human brain has both problem-solving modules and social correlation modules and both of these have evolved. In the book, Martin explores the evolution of the human brain for two behavioural patterns: status-seeking and desire to belong. In this, selection pressure, the behaviour and its mechanism are well examined using subconscious and competitive frameworks. Several examples and emotions like love and anger and their correlation with internal biological processes make an interesting read. However, status and belongingness as two natural outcomes of social emotions appear to be a case of a force fit.

Competition for garnering a greater share of resources is inherently linked to the survival instinct and is universal, but this principle is not applicable for other facets of social behaviour. War as a result of a dominance trap between two leaders to seek status and resources is universal, but linking a personal feud between Saddam Hussein and George H.W. Bush as a key reason for war in Iraq in 2003 is, perhaps, stretching the logic too far. Martin makes the reader feel that power and status as means of increasing reproductive fitness are universal truths. That is not so. In case this was true, the most powerful societies would also have been the happiest ones.

Martin makes an interesting observation that belongingness helps in escaping violence through safety in numbers. Additionally, through better productivity and efficiency, he explores the concept of 'collective brain' wherein the groups are empowered and can grow. Detailed explanations of neurological processes of 'status-seeking' and 'groupishness' give a scientific perspective to a sociological issue. With the growth in population, the number of groups and their average size has grown, but this has led to a multitude of problems as well. These problems relate to identity, hierarchy, trade, disease and punishment (p. 108). To solve these problems, humans have constructed moral codes, religions and shared ideologies. These solutions are not static but keep getting redefined to meet the upcoming challenges. Practically, acts that are unacceptable today for a group may be acceptable after a trigger event, and this is guided by situation, environment, and the cost associated. The chapter on the growth of human groups is very interesting as it links up the growing size with reduced violence, giving valuable statistics. Additionally, it presents a fresh view of the self-domestication of humans using biological processes as the key argument.

The conscious and reasoning brain is the reason for the survival and development of the human race. In certain circumstances, reasoning indeed helps us position ourselves socially, and justify our actions, both before and after they are taken. In most cases, logic, reasoning and emotions govern decision-making. This applies to individuals but in a group there are many factors play a role in the group decision. Religion, moral codes, ideologies that can act as a glue for a group can also limit the scope of their growth. To prove their belongings to a group, individuals can be motivated to take unprecedented steps. However, such cases are rare and normally, logic and reasoning guide the choices an individual makes. In this context, the most important role is of knowledge. The

decisions made by individuals are primarily based on the knowledge they possess and their environment. By controlling the knowledge flow, societies and group behaviour can be moulded to a large extent. However, individual behaviour is still controlled by the desire to enhance the status and retain relevance in a group.

By linking the biological evolution of the brain and societal changes to violence, the author gives a fresh perspective of the British thoughts on causes of conflict in West Asia. He does not agree with the broad strategies followed by the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) to minimise violence in this area by creating a counter-narrative ideology. He is right. However, a major limitation of this work is that it tries to look at the evolution of the human race as a homogenous trajectory. Values and ethos prevalent in one part of the world cannot be force-fitted into another part of the world. This has been the main reason for the failure of the American and European approach and the unabated violence in West Asia. In fact, within Asia, there are multiple and distinct strands, such as in the Indian subcontinent, China, East Asia, and West Asia. Each has its value system and status and belongingness are not necessarily key drivers. Therefore, there is no universal applicability to the opening line of the book, 'humans fight to achieve status and belongingness'.

Notwithstanding this obvious limitation, the book provides a very good insight into various facets of human brain evolution and its correlation with violence. It is a very useful book to understand the primary causes of violence and, thus, *Why We Fight* makes for an interesting read. Although it is a story of violence analysis from one side of the red line, it is best suited for conflict analysers, strategists, planners and practitioners. The narration of incidents of actual violence makes it easy to understand its psychological aspects. This book helps us understand the basics of development of individuals as part of groups and a sense of belongingness and status. It also serves as an ideal background for the British perspectives on the rest of the world. Additionally, it dispels a large number of myths about violence and its correlation with religion and ideology.