

Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Combattre. Une anthropologie historique de la guerre moderne (XIX^e-XXI^e siècles)*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2007, 328 p.

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Imagine a historian at the height of his powers writing a DEA dissertation, that excellent French institution by which a potential doctoral student surveys the sources and literature, examines the concepts and thinks through the arguments on which the larger thesis will be based. That is the exercise that Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, a leading historian of the Great War, invites the reader to share as he maps his thinking on a new project – an historical anthropology of modern warfare, and more particularly of combat.

Why the subject? Because, as Audoin-Rouzeau explains in his introduction, warfare has gained new prominence in our consciousness since the beginning of the 1990s with the conflicts in the Gulf, the former Yugoslavia, Central and North Eastern Africa and the Middle East. It has also become even more visible than in the era of Vietnam because new satellite and night vision technology bring the armchair spectator into the heart of battle. Yet combat remains one of the most opaque of all human activities since killing and being killed in battle, and the acts and emotions that make up this process, are one of the most difficult areas to investigate. This is partly because the violence of combat leaves only indirect and scattered traces. It is also because those who engage in combat (or are its victims) have left its emotions and mindsets behind by the time they reflect on it with a degree of calm. They have returned from the atavism of 'kill or be killed' to a state of 'civilization' that is founded on sublimating, or at least masking, that imperative. Reconstructing the meanings and emotions of combat after the event poses a fundamental epistemological challenge to those who have returned, just as it does to those who have never gone.

But why should anthropology and history be the privileged disciplines for tackling this subject? In defining his approach in chapter one of the book, Audoin-Rouzeau makes the entirely sensible assumption that combat and killing are ubiquitous yet particular, part of the human condition yet highly dependent on time and circumstance. If anthropology seeks out the pattern, history establishes just how variable combat has been. At times Audoin-Rouzeau elides these disciplines with others, notably the sociology of Norbert Elias (whose entire theory of 'civilization' seemed like a refusal to contemplate his own battle trauma in the First World War and flight from Nazi Germany), but he does not systematically explore what other social sciences might bring to the enquiry. One thinks of the military psychology developed by the American forces in the Second World War for understanding the stress of combat and the psychiatric literature on 'shell shock'. Still, in principle 'historical anthropology' makes good sense as an approach, given the range of reference required from 'primitive' to 'sophisticated' societies and from prehistory to the present.

In chapter two, however, Audoin-Rouzeau finds that performance fails to live up to promise as he reviews the secondary literature. Observing that anthropologists have had little to say by virtue of their fieldwork on the place of combat in the indigenous societies that were their principal domain of study for much of the 20th century, he scours the accounts of both anthropologists and historians who were themselves caught up in modern warfare to see if they brought their disciplinary insights to bear on their own experiences. The results, while making fascinating reading, are thin. The British anthropologists Evans Pritchard and Edmund Leach drew on their anthropological knowledge when recruiting indigenous peoples (in Sudan and Burma respectively) to fight in the Second World War, but at best made elliptical reference to the experience subsequently and did not turn it into a subject of study. Of the historians under consideration (Marc Bloch, Pierre Renouvin, Richard Tawney), only Tawney directly addressed combat in a remarkable essay, 'The Attack', that he published within a month of participating in the disastrous first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, in which he reflected on the 'savage paleolithic' in every man.¹

Having concluded that the very silence on combat by participant historians and anthropologists demonstrates the difficulty of turning something so personal and brutal into a dispassionate social analysis, Audoin-Rouzeau, in his third chapter, asks whether it is possible for the historian to develop an anthropological perspective on combat by using existing studies of warfare. Again, the results are mixed. A useful measuring stick is provided by those anthropologists who have pointed out that 'primitive warfare' is capable of being conducted efficiently and with extreme violence, going as far as total extermination in the case of New Guinea tribes. Nonetheless, Audoin-Rouzeau concludes that by and large anthropologists have chosen to look the other way when faced with combat, whereas at least some historians have seen fit to make it their subject. While critical of Victor Hanson's view that since classical Greece combat by massed ranks of men has constituted a 'western way of warfare' (on the grounds that this has coexisted with a host of other forms of combat), he finds the most developed reflections on battle in the work of historians such as John Keegan, who understand that warfare is an activity with its own cultural frame of reference, or of journalists such as Jean Hazfeld on the Rwandan genocide, who see how profoundly the violence of combat turns on the construction of the figure of the enemy – a crucial point when women and children enter the killing fields with massacres and genocide.

The results of this feasibility study ('leçon d'attente') lead Audoin-Rouzeau to his final chapter and the real originality of his book. In the absence of anything better than hints and suggestions in the existing literature, there is nothing for it but to invent the historical anthropology of combat by starting the job himself. This he does by considering what a study of the body in modern warfare might look like. Ideas tumble out. Landscapes of battle suggest ecologies of warfare, in which the trench lines and shell holes of the Great War point to the horizontality that ended the vertical stance of three hundred years of offensive warfare, while the forests of Bielorrussia testify to the conditions of guerrilla combat. Uniforms, drill and military training are means of acclimatizing soldiers to changing battlefields but also produce an aesthetics of

¹ 'The Attack', *The Westminster Gazette*, August 1916.

combat that speaks volumes on the varying place of warfare in society. The weapon as an extension of the body is both symptom and cause of the changing practices of killing, leading to parallel universes in which the 'primitive' machete remains a lethal and highly efficient means of murder (as in the Rwandan genocide) while the invisible battlefield, first established by long-range firepower in the South African War of 1899-1902, culminates in the touch-screen destruction of laser bombing. Perhaps most important of all, the decline of hand-to-hand fighting and the exposure to death by anonymous weaponry has led in modern warfare to the 'crushing of the fighter's ego' (p. 255) and the transformation of the personal investment in combat. Whether this has undermined warfare as the supreme measure of heroism and masculine agency in most human cultures, or whether military heroism remains a central value system, is not the least important question suggested by this discussion.

The final chapter, like the book as a whole, is a sketch. But having examined the existing literature and its limitations, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau uses it to map a new field with daring and originality. Given the difficulty of carrying it out under the conditions of modern warfare, field-work in the classical anthropological sense may remain of limited use in exploring combat. But that other classic tool of anthropology, the museum with its horde of artefacts (in this case, the tools of death and defence) is highly relevant, as Audoin-Rouzeau well knows from his involvement in the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* at Péronne.² And the masses of letters and diaries written in the after-shock of combat, not to mention the documents of psychic breakdown or the drawings of soldier-artists, represent a gold-mine of evidence for the wars of the recent past fought by largely literate populations. The work to come promises not only to establish more systematically the modern forms and variants of combat as a perennial human activity but also to furnish a deeper understanding of how the 'savage' and the 'civilized', once seen as the opposite poles of anthropological enquiry, are in reality uncomfortable twins.

² See Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, 'Les Réserves de l'Historial', in Caroline Fontaine et alii (eds.), *Les Collections de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, Historial de la Grande Guerre/ Somogy, 2008), p. 160-167.