



Fun in war

Antonio De Lauri

Fun has every shade of connotation, from the most joyful to the most sinister. In a sporadic and anecdotal way, novels, films, music and, more recently, blogs and social media remind us that those involved directly in the horrors of war also experience fun, excitement and allure.

However, the element of fun in war has rarely been the focus of systematic theorisation and empirical scrutiny in the social sciences. This gap in academic research has had several effects.

Firstly, it has contributed to confining emotions to the private sphere, thus compromising a deep understanding of the nexus of politics and emotions in war. Secondly, it has resulted in a historically shaped 'morality of war' that, at least to a certain extent, has overlooked the *different moralities* of war manifested and expressed by those directly involved in war. In other

words, the focus has mainly been put on 'moral dissonance' in the sense of the ethical dilemmas that soldiers face instead of on the broad plurality of moral attitudes that reveal different yet simultaneous emotional and psychological repertoires of adaptation, identification, exacerbation and resistance to the multiple effects and dynamics of war.

Thirdly, the lack of systematic studies of fun in war has prevented state and military institutions from understanding fun as intrinsic to the rationality of war. For instance, when British soldiers beat

Iraqi citizen Baha Mousa to death in 2003 or when detainees in Abu Ghraib suffered torture from US soldiers—along with a series of many other examples—'fun' played a role in the way the violence was inflicted and justified.

However, these episodes were largely labelled as exceptions by both military authorities and the media, thus reproducing the widely accepted but misplaced assumption that fun (as well as pleasure, joy, etc.) is alien to the way that war and soldiering are experienced on the ground.

Although recent studies have started to address the complex array of feelings and experiences in war, the questions related to the moral, strategic, psychological, emotional and social implications of fun in war remain vastly understudied in the social sciences. It is important to focus on elements such as fun or pleasure because, given that they are commonly understood as antithetical to war and beyond its scope, they give us the opportunity to expand the very meaning of what it means to be at war, thus rethinking the epistemology of war.

The suffering and hardships humans endure in war cannot be stressed enough. It is precisely for this reason, however, that we need a more nuanced understanding of war. In the WARFUN project, funded by the European Research Council, we aim to unveil the plurality of experiences and affective grammars that the exclusive focus on military and normative analyses would otherwise neglect.

The anthropological tradition of 'fieldwork under fire' emphasises the ambivalent sentiments that arise as troubles escalate during large-scale violence and the crucial role that social actors have in determining the magnitude and consequences of conflict. War can only be understood through the broadest and the most complex assemblages of emotions and imagination available. Only by taking the wide array of sensations and emotions into account will we be equipped to understand how war blurs the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary and foresee the long-term, articulated effects of war on those who practice it. This consideration builds on the assumption that war has a co-participative epistemic nature since it cannot be simply described as the by-product of political decisions from above; war is also determined by participation and initiatives from below.

Axes of research

Our research advances along two main axes of research.

Thrill of war

The first axis of research looks at the feeling of enjoyment and euphoria generated

by being involved in armed combat. We can perhaps get a sense of the ludic dimension of war through the agential character of violence and its carnivalesque atmosphere. In this sense, war and its violent corollary would enact what Mikhail Bakhtin observed during carnival time, namely the temporary suspension of hierarchies and a specific kind of communication, which is impossible in everyday life. This form of communication enables a sense of fun that takes on a hue of a carnivalesque abandon, even when violence is involved, where 'the other' is mocked and the everyday sense of morality is transgressed through jokes and forms of bodily humour. In such a context, fun is understood as an expression of both direct and indirect communication, a manner of public engagement, as well as a 'ritual of inversion' in which the proprieties of structure (the declared goals and mandates of war) are lampooned and violated, yet the finalities of the project of war (dominion, control, etc.) remain intact.

Fun under conditions of warfare

While the previous axis of research shows how the suspension of the ordinary generates conditions for fun to emerge, 'fun under conditions of warfare' sheds light on soldiers' and fighters' attempts to retrieve a lost sense of normalcy by engaging in activities that convey a sense of joy and well-being. Crucially, fun does not exist in opposition to large-scale violence but can be deeply implicated within it. In the midst of traumatic, deadly events, the protracted experience of war also implies that it is often boredom and fun that become dominant feelings. In these situations, fun provides a venue for re-creating the ordinary against frustration, violence and destruction. It becomes a significant form of resilience that provides people with creative ways to acquire a sense of normalcy and create new values amidst political and social instability.

By following these two axes of research, the WARFUN project does not merely focus on the escapist dimension of fun but rather on its generative dimension.

PROJECT NAME

War and Fun: Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience (WARFUN)

PROJECT SUMMARY

WARFUN investigates the plurality of experiences and affective grammars that are generally neglected by normative approaches towards war and soldiering. The project delves into the experience of war from the perspective of those who fight and aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be at war.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Antonio De Lauri is a Research Professor at the Chr. Michelsen Institute and the Director of the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Public Anthropologist*, the Editor of Berghahn Books' series Humanitarianism and Security, the co-founder of the Anthropology of Humanitarianism Network, and a contributor to the Costs of War project of the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs.

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