

---

## Ritualization in International Relations

P. R. Calder

*Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B* 1966 **251**, 451-455

doi: 10.1098/rstb.1966.0033

---

### Email alerting service

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article - sign up in the box at the top right-hand corner of the article or click [here](#)

## Ritualization in international relations

BY P. R. CALDER\*

*Sir Montague Burton Professor of International Relations,  
University of Edinburgh*

*Homo sapiens* now has the power to veto the evolution of his own species. In the mathematics of 'overkill' it is estimated (Pauling 1963) that the nuclear stockpile amounts to more than 320 000 megatons, i.e. a ration of more than 100 tons of TNT-equivalent for every man, woman and child on earth or 14 tons per acre of the entire land-surface.

Since *Homo sapiens* is exceptional among the creatures in so far as he deliberately destroys his own species in internecine war, and since he has now the capacity for annihilation it becomes necessary to ritualize his acquired habits of self-destruction. That means contriving intra-species relationships as sensibly as do the animals and observing the Law of the Jungle, by which no predator ever exterminates the species on which it preys nor vents its aggressive instincts to the hazard of its own kind.

'War is Nature's pruning hook', said Sir Arthur Keith (1927). That was a strange interpretation of 'the survival of the fittest', but it was the kind of statement which could be invoked as scientific 'authority' for accepting mutual destruction as an innate characteristic and for regarding war as part of the mechanism of natural selection rather than as a temporary deviation.

Today, 'it has now been established for every species (Russell 1964) observed that a healthy wild primate society shows no trace of serious fighting either within or between bands'.

Nature is dominated by struggle and *Homo sapiens* did not invent conflict, which prevails among animals in mating, in territorial disputes and in competition for food. But the bull-walrus, fighting for mastery of the harem, does not kill his rivals, which accept the healable scars of defeat. Animals will defend their territory and repel intruders but will not retaliate in destructive feuds. Animals will fight their own kind for food but it is *ad hoc* fighting, not the killing-off of intra-species competition. Fight or flight are innate mechanisms of self-preservation but, in nature, one is not 'courage' and the other 'cowardice'. (We see the human contradiction in our evaluation of heroism: if a person were actually 'fearless', i.e. insensitive to fear, like the spiderman on a skyscraper, he would not be rated as a hero.) Aggression and fear are characteristics of all creatures but they are frequently combined and ritualized to minimize damage and serve as a bond.

In simple societies (closer to nature) one finds evidence that *Homo sapiens* can be as 'civilized' or 'ritualized' as the animals. The Eskimos of the Central Arctic have no word for 'war' and in conflicts with the Red Indians of the treeline, they (by no means a timid people) would invariably withdraw to avoid bloodshed. In their *ethos*, killing of a fellow-human is sanctioned only in the case of stealing or of madness—because both imperil the group. In what has been condemned as patricide, matricide and infanticide among the Eskimos, there is the conscious ritualization of group-survival. Traditionally, if the

\* Now Lord Ritchie-Calder.

hunting-group 'lost-out' on the caribou migration and started the winter with inadequate food, the first to die (by choice) would be the old people, by carbon-monoxide poisoning in a sealed-up igloo or the 'sleep-death' by exposure (like Captain Oates); the next would be (by exposure) the infants, because they would suffer least; and then, as the cache diminished, inexorable rationing, leaving to the last, the best hunter and the youngest wife, so that the group might go on (Calder 1957). Among the headhunters of Borneo, the taking of heads was not tribal carnage but as ritualized as duelling; only if the young Dyak were unsure of himself and had to prove his daring would he bring back a head for the altar. After the soldiers (and missionaries) of the White Rajahs had made headhunting a capital offence and eternal damnation, white paratroopers were dropped in Borneo to teach the headhunters how to hunt Japanese heads, to the confusion of the Dyaks who could not understand why it was 'sinful' to practice their own headhunting rituals but meritorious to massacre the white man's enemies (Calder 1954). One of the most remarkable ritualizations of conflict was the 'Confederacy of the Pines'. Fifty years before the first white settlements in North America, five Red Indian tribes, the Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga and Onondaga, having agreed their territories, renounced war. The Code of Confederacy went as follows: 'The Confederated chiefs now uproot the tallest pine tree and into the cavity thereby made, we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, deep down into the under-earth currents of water, flowing to unknown regions we cast all weapons of strife. We bury them from sight and we plant again the tree. Thus shall the Great Peace be established. (Collier 1947). These were the 'sauvages' (the woodlanders) who were to be treated as savages.

The continuing study of more and more species confirms, as Kropotkin (1902) maintained against the exponents of 'tooth and claw', that cooperation, not conflict, is the basis of long-range evolution. (This does not preclude competition in the sense of differential survival.) Observations of the wild primates in natural conditions have shown that group-conflict is averted by the principle of 'territory' held in common by each band and respected by its neighbours and that order is maintained by a hierarchy of ranks, evolved peacefully, by recognition of individual attributes which contribute to the stability of the group. This breaks down in overcrowded conditions when invasions of group territories, hostility to alien types and increasing anonymity (i.e. the loss of recognition of individual attributes) confuses the natural ritualization. Then disputes degenerate into violence and killing; animal tyrants replace the mentor-types; and ruthless competition and damaging conflict replace cooperation.

Similar deleterious effects operate in human society. 'Territory' still exists in terms of ethnic groups, imperfectly expressed as political 'nations', but *Homo sapiens's* habitat, in terms of food-supplies and natural resources, required for his increasingly sophisticated needs, is a world shrunken into a neighbourhood by his own ingenuity, his communications and high-speed transportation. So he has, synthetically, to ritualize cooperation. The 'band' still resents the intruder ('neo-colonialism'). And the intruders often resent the 'band' ('ingratitude'). Imprints ('Limeys', 'Yanks', 'Frogs', 'Wogs', etc.) have to be overprinted by new identities—camouflage. This has been done successfully by merging nationalities (and colours and beliefs) in the technical assistance teams of the United Nations and its specialized agencies (e.g. a team in Afghanistan, then intensely xenophobic,

included British, Haitian, Burmese, Finnish, American, Russian, French and Indian members, working, in each case, with an Afghan counterpart). The ritualization, in such instances, is that a country, as a member-state of United Nations, is asking for and getting assistance from its own group, without any sense of intrusion or obligation. As Senator Fulbright of the U.S.A. told his compatriots, 'I have never seen, in any country, "World Bank—Go home!"'

A variation of the substitute 'imprinting' is the Peace Corps, of the United States and the Council for Voluntary Service Overseas, of Great Britain. The object, apart from material help they may provide, is to induce mutual respect and to expose the participants (mainly young persons) to the unfamiliar 'band' and to establish bonds with the aided. Occasionally there is 'pecking' of the young 'birds of strange plumage' when the imprint of origin is obtrusive but, in the ritualization of international relations, such movements have been eminently successful—sometimes, perhaps, more beneficial to those who go than to those whom they are seeking to help. The ultimate ritualization of this will be the embodiment of those national service organizations in a comprehensive world service working through the U.N.—the greater group.

With such ritualization will go symbol-ritual—the Old School Tie of International Service, the chevrons of countries served, even medals. But the main accomplishment will be the camouflage of national or racial characteristics which are the imprints of suspicions and resentments.

In inter-species relationships between the predator and the prey, killing is a natural condition of survival. In intra-species relationships aggressiveness is natural in the individual as a sensory-biochemical reaction—like the mild man whose adrenals reacted to the sight of a carter ill-using his horse and who explained, 'My stick hit him'. Or like Tom Sawyer, whose barnyard instinct responded to the sight of the boy, Alfred Temple, who wore Sunday go-to-meeting clothes on weekdays. He must be from the city *ergo*, he must be fought as a stranger to the band.

War, however, is something different. It is a human invention. It has been said: 'Language and war were born together, as the goddess of learning and battles sprang from the head of Zeus' (Russell 1964). It is true that war is the breakdown of the semantics of diplomacy, which itself is the ritualization of competition and quarrels. But surely war really began with weaponry which interfered with the natural instincts of fight or flight. It gave advantage to the individual who converted his fist into a club beyond arm's reach, and later who could throw a spear, fire an arrow from a bow or a stone from a catapult, or a shell from a gun at long range or an intercontinental ballistic missile from a launching pad, half the world away from the enemy. In the absence of sensory-biochemical impulses, anger became synthetic—worked up by war-dances or radio-propaganda. Men could no longer identify their 'natural' enemies in anonymous and impersonal battles.

Battles had to be ritualized—the war-paint or the uniform and the banners round which the impersonalized had to rally lest they destroy each other instead of the prescribed enemy. In the greater anonymity of suits of armour, the knights had to have crests and armorial bearings, with Colleges of Heraldry to ensure the distinctiveness, and Orders of Chivalry to regulate behaviour. As a ritualization of battle, the Middle Ages produced the refinements of the tournament and the joust—rarely a *l'outrance*. Chivalry disappeared

with gun-powder and person-to-person wars were replaced by a capacity for remote destruction. Attempts were made to ritualize even that by 'Laws of War' which purported to confine the killing to armies and navy in action and protect civilians and prisoners of war. Total war makes no such distinctions.

Cooperation is the ideal and co-existence the rationale of international relations. We have tried to institutionalize Reason in the United Nations and to redirect hostility, but we still have not learned from the animals that the beasts equipped with the most dangerous weapons (for inter-species purposes) are those which have most elaborately ritualized their conflicts with each other. For 'life', i.e. survival, we have substituted 'way of life', i.e. ideology and insist on the fire-power to defend, or impose it.

Nevertheless, in quite recent history, we have had several striking analogies with the mechanisms of animal ritualization such as redirection, displacement and cut-out.

The Suez crisis was one. To recall the circumstances briefly: Nasser was committed in the eyes of his own people to the High Aswan Dam project and had secured the financial backing of the United States, and the United Nations' World Bank, with Britain concurring. Then the United States State Department disapproved of his relations with the Soviet Union and withdrew its financial support. It constrained the World Bank and Britain to do likewise. Nasser, to redeem himself in the eyes of his own people, sought to revenge the snub. He could not attack the United States, against which his main hostility was directed, so he 'redirected' and attacked Britain, by seizing the Suez Canal. Britain threatened direct reprisals but was stopped by world opinion and by the U.S. Government's disclaimer. Two months later Israel launched its forces against the Egyptians and Britain 'ritualized' its original intention by intervening (with France, which was financially interested in the Canal) by military action. Ostensibly, it was to separate the combatants 'on behalf of the United Nations' and to reason with the principals. The United Nations disowned the operation, which had to be abandoned and an international peace force substituted. The 'ritualization' had one flaw, apart from being ineffective. The second intention was supposed to be persuasive but the leaflets dropped were those printed for the original, punitive operation, calling on the Egyptian people to overthrow Nasser.

The Cuban crisis introduced a new displacement ritualization into international affairs. The Soviet Union had installed nuclear missile bases on the island of Cuba. The President of the United States, without going through the ritual of appealing to the United Nations Security Council, ordered a naval task force to 'quarantine' the island. ('Quarantine' is a ritualized word for 'naval blockade' which in international law is an act of war.) Then the issue was taken to the Security Council, where the United States expected to get a majority indemnification for the action taken, which the U.S.S.R. would promptly veto. The matter would then be referred to the General Assembly where a two-thirds majority would turn the U.S. action into U.N. action. If the U.S. position were not supported, it could still be claimed that direct action had been justified because the process would have shown that the United Nations was incapable of removing a threat of aggression. But the vote in the Security Council was never taken because it was seen to be unlikely that the U.S. would get the necessary majority for the Soviet Union to veto—because of the legal infringement of the Charter.

Meanwhile, the two major nuclear powers were hornlocked on the edge of a precipice,

struggling to disengage. Approaches were made covertly to the Secretary General who went through the ritual of calling separately the two Ambassadors who were publicly intransigent. Negotiations were begun. The U.S. was mounting a task force, militarily to invade Cuba, with the predictable certainty of a nuclear war. Fortunately the sun still rises in the East, with 7 hours difference in time between Moscow and Washington, so that the President was able to snatch Khrushchev's concessions, from a radio broadcast, and stop the invasion.

The important 'ritualization' was that the antagonists turned away from each other to the U.N., not as a deliberative body, but as a symbol, in the person of the Secretary General.

'Cut-off' was exemplified in the proceedings of the 19th General Assembly. According to the advice of the International Court of Justice, the peace-keeping activities of the U.N., authorized by the General Assembly have to be paid for by all member-states. Any state which is 2 years behind in its dues loses its right to vote. The U.S.S.R. and France, for complicated reasons, had refused to pay their peace-keeping dues; the U.S. had proclaimed that if they did not pay up, and if they tried to vote on any issue, her delegate would move that their voting rights would be suspended. It was certain that they would then walk out. Here was another Big Power confrontation, which, in the upshot, the Powers themselves wanted to avoid. By general agreement time was to be bought by bringing before the Assembly only those items which could be accepted without a vote—avoiding the confrontation.

Only one member state was recalcitrant—Albania—but the delegate was reminded that while he might want to embarrass the Soviet Union by forcing a vote, he, by doing so, would appear to be acting as an American 'stooge'. For 2 months, there was no vote. The African President of the Assembly just did not see the Albanian delegate when he tried to intervene. In the end, when he went to the rostrum to demand a vote, there was an actual 'cut-off'. The microphone was switched off and the Assembly recessed *nem con* to find a solution of the peace-keeping difficulties.

The eventual ritualization of aggression may lie in the Games Theory. Since computers can be programmed to deal with such concepts as 'first strike', 'second strike', 'counterforce strike', 'limited war', 'tolerable cost' and 'acceptable casualties' and since each side can calculate the other's capabilities and foresee the various gambits, obviously the outcome can be seen in advance and actual fighting becomes irrelevant. Politicians 'concede victory' in elections to their opponents on computer results. Why not statesmen in world affairs?

#### REFERENCES (Calder)

- Calder, R. 1954 *Men against the jungle*. London: George Allen & Unwin.  
 Calder, R. 1957 *Men against the frozen north*. London: George Allen & Unwin.  
 Collier, J. 1947 *Indians of the Americas*. New York: Mentor.  
 Keith, Sir Arthur 1927 *Rep. Brit. Assoc.* pp. 1–15.  
 Kropotkin, P. A. 1902 *Mutual aid a factor in evolution*.  
 Pauling, L. 1963 Nobel Prize Address.  
 Russell, W. M. S. 1964 *The Listener*, 12 Nov.