Book Review: Why Wars Happen by Jeremy Black

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ship, scholars interested in understanding feminist theory and citizenship would find more fruitful discussions in Mary Dietz, Will Kymlicka, Anne Phillips, or Iris Marion Young. Where Lister tries to “get beyond” the theoretical problems of global citizenship, she often simply changes the terms of the debate without recognizing how these changes reinstate the same problems.

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British historian Jeremy Black of the University of Exeter has attempted to demonstrate the role of bellicose culture as a cause of war. Covering a great span of history from the year 1450 until the present, Professor Black offers the thesis that societies or governments with war-oriented values are more likely to choose fighting as an option whenever crises and other diplomatic decision-making contexts arise. The author does assure the reader that bellicose culture is not the only major force accounting for war even though culture has an important role.

The promising title of Why Wars Happen quickly becomes a theoretical disappointment. Professor Black barely goes beyond the commonsense assertion that warlike perceptions rooted in society contribute to the occurrence of war. In fact, his work is tautological in the sense that he packs over five centuries of warfare into less than 250 pages of text so that he can remind the reader again and again that bellicose attitudes are at work. Black does raise interesting questions about culture such as how
do bellicose societies, states, and international systems evolve (p. 45) and how should we handle the theoretical problem of culture constantly undergoing change (p. 48). Unfortunately, the theoretical depth to answer the few good questions Black raises is not present. The best chapter is the last one, "War Today," which takes on an analytical tone lacking in most of this book. The reasons Professor Black offers in this chapter, for the decline of international war among major states, is by now well rehearsed, however.

If Black's book offers little for scholars specializing in war, could it be useful for undergraduates? Why Wars Happen is chockablock with detail without much guidance as to why these particulars are important, and the writing style is stiff. As with some other English scholars, Professor Black crochets with detail to demonstrate the authority of his knowledge when a single strand of clear purpose and effect would do better. The author also has the annoying habit of inventing words or using strange forms of known terms. War proneness appears as "warfulness" (p. 37). Intentions are rendered "intentionality" (p. 240). Bellicose, a central concept, appears numerous times first in the legitimate form of bellicosity and then as the peculiar "bellicist" and "bellicism" forms. More forgivable, Black on occasion uses the archaic "hitherto." For undergraduates, the better choice is the time-tested Why Nations Go To War by John Stoessinger.

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