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## Peace in Our Time

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## Peace in Our Time

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By Michael Mousseau

At the age of seventeen I decided to spend my life cracking a puzzle, and what better puzzle to crack than the scourge of war? Being an avid reader of history, as an undergraduate I grasped that most theorizing on the subject is inapplicable to the real world. So I decided to supplement my formal education by traveling the globe, talking to people from diverse backgrounds. With student loans and odd jobs, by the time I started my doctorate study I had logged over thirty months living out of a backpack vagabonding through forty-five mostly-developing countries. My inspiration was Eugene Burdick and William Lederer's *The Ugly American*, a roman à clef that describes how Americans abroad can sometimes appear unaware of local history and culture, and standoffish. Before arriving in a country I would read up on its history and current events, and pick up a few local words and phrases. I often traveled alone in non-touristed areas, blending in and interacting with locals as much as I could.

Among my experiences are countless hours with Irish migrant laborers in London, serving bar to back-packing tourists in Athens, and picking watermelons on an agricultural commune in Israel. I lived with local families in Mexico and Guatemala, worked in a village in Soviet Russia, took trains or river-boated across China, traveled with Bedouins by camel in the Sinai, and motorcycled across India and Nepal. In East Africa I rode with locals on the overcrowded matatus, or walked.

Two experiences led to personal discoveries that have significantly informed my on-going research. The first occurred in the last days of the Soviet Union, where I managed to obtain a worker's visa and lived for a few weeks as an official worker of the Soviet Union in a village near Volgograd (then Stalingrad). Since shops were always empty, the rational thing to do if you found something for sale was to buy it, whether you needed it or not, and share whatever you didn't need with friends. After growing accustomed to buying whatever was available, I left my friends in the Soviet Union and traveled by train from Yerevan, Armenia, to Kars, Turkey. Kars is a poor village, but after two months in the Soviet Union I was overwhelmed by the abundance of items in the shops. I quickly began buying things, and in short order had accrued much more than I needed. I then realized that I had been making my economic decisions not by reason but by habit: accustomed in the Soviet Union to buying whatever was available, I was ill-equipped for the capitalist world where everything is available. I was buying according to accessibility (the communist norm), rather than according to one's needs (the capitalist norm).

The resulting insight was powerful: humans are not rational actors; we make many economic decisions by habit! Most social scientists assume the rational actor model, and in Economics this means the assumption that buying according to one's needs is a universal fact of human nature. But I now comprehended that the ubiquitous Western assumption of what is rational is itself a product of the peculiar economic norms of Western capitalism! By unwittingly subjecting myself to cross-economic quasi-experimentation, I had come to realize that the core assumption that underlies the bulk of Western social science, that rational behavior means buying according to one's needs, is not a universally-true fact; there is no economic man: humans function on economic norms!

Roughly four months after leaving the Soviet Union I was in the Samburo tribe region of northern Kenya, a place remote enough that foreigners were not allowed to go there until about a decade previously. Because I traveled as a local on the matatus, I was able to meet and become friends with a young Samburo sub-chief named Leresi, who offered to guide me into the outback. He collected two warriors with spears for protection from the lions and other animals (see picture); all I had to do was haggle with locals along the way for goat milk for breakfast and an occasional chicken for dinner. We walked for five days, wherein I inquired in-depth about Samburo customs, which Leresi as a sub-chief was well-schooled; I also observed the local economy, which was pastoralist. Since this was northern Kenya, far from Nairobi and the coast, the Samburo were able to maintain their traditional beliefs and customs; they were neither Christian nor Muslim.

I learned from Leresi that Samburo customs are highly complex, with detailed rules for what can be eaten, how to dress, and so on. Then it struck me: the pastoral economic conditions and complex nature of the customs of the Samburo paralleled the complex customs and pastoral economic conditions of the Israelis who fashioned Deuteronomy at least two thousand years earlier and several thousand miles distant. I understood then that economic conditions can impact norms and values, a view I later learned is called 'cultural materialism' in Anthropology.

Convinced by my ethnographic experiences that economic conditions can impact norms and values, and that humans make many decisions by habit rather than reason, I resumed my study on the causes of war at Binghamton University. With a dissertation-year fellowship allowing me to focus intensely on my subject, one hot summer day in July 1996 it hit me: the economic condition of contract-intensive economy, which characterizes Western developed economies, may lie at the root of the Western developed "habits" of democracy, rights, and the rule of law over violence. By traveling the world and seeking to view it from other perspectives, I had inadvertently positioned myself to gain insights into my very own culture!

Space does not permit an explanation of Economic Norms Theory here, suffice to say that it is today the only existing unified theory of violence in the literature, and it informs us how to achieve permanent peace within and among nations: create economic opportunity, which frees people from the habit of loyalty to patrons and nurtures the habits of respecting equal rights and the rule of law over violence. The implication is grand: global peace is not only possible, but with the spread of contractualist economy over the past century it is rapidly emerging before our very eyes.

