

Feuds for and against unity: a critical comparison.

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Abstract. By critically comparing the literature on feud in its emergence as an anthropological concept, in its development as a tool for interpreting late medieval societies (especially in the German and Bohemian contexts), and in its possible identification in the analysis of Amerindian tribal societies of Latin America, we discovered a legitimate hypothesizing of a concrete spectrum of the feud dynamics of fission and fusion that tends to an universal usage of the concept and further approximates the studies of pre-statal vengeance in different historical contexts.

Keywords. Peace, Feud, State, Tribe, Europe, Latin America.

1. Introduction and Method

While reading through academic literature on feuding practices in both a late medieval European and a Latin Amerindian context of discussion, we concluded that there is — simultaneously — an important historiographical symmetry but also an important historiographical asymmetry which connects and differentiates them. In order to address this curious fact, we have opted for this article to bear the sole intention of comparing the hermeneutic functions that the process of feuding has in the understanding of German and Bohemian late medieval societies that, on the one hand, developed towards a state, and Latin American tribal societies that, on the other hand, develops against a state. A critical reading of both of these literatures will benefit a structural understanding of the historical role that feuding plays in a tendentially universal manner (which is an underlying trend in the study of the feud), while also differentiating a superstructural (i.e. cultural and political) tendency that can't be easily conciliated, that is: the warring tendency to produce protostatal security and the warring tendency to produce antistatal security. Our hope is that we were able to discover this topic in non-modern Latin America as not merely an arbitrary choice of research focus but as a rather relevant research gap that will help to further approximate the global studies on the relations we find between feud, peace, vengeance, and state development.

2. Peace in the feud

It was the anthropological research of Max Gluckman that pioneeringly developed, with rigor, the rather counterintuitive notion of **peace in the feud** [1]: an

overdetermination of peacemaking in the otherwise apparently purely violent activity of feuding. What follows from this is that the expectations of enmity and friendship imposes themselves as a pre-modern regulation that negates the so speculated anarchical characteristics of a **state of nature**. The conditions of possibility of such dynamic are that the feud-making process becomes directly proportional to the amount of social ties associated with friendship, kinship, or alliance and — therefore — the increasing amount of enmities should be constrained by a tendency of coextensive amounts of peacemaking arrangements. Gluckman intended to introduce rationality to the stateless feud as he noticed that all “over the world there are societies which have no governmental institutions [...] [and they] **clearly do not live in unceasing fear of breaking up in lawlessness**” (our bold). It is emblematic that, by deconstructing the notion of irrationality of the stateless feud, Gluckman would be tackling the notion of irrationality in stateless societies in general, insofar as this understanding rested on a tacit certainty about the allegedly infinite bellicosity of these societies. He stated, in fact, that the “Nuer were fiercely independent warriors, who [...] are bellicose among themselves [...] [and] composed of sections which may at times be hostile to one another, but unite against a more distant enemy”.

The fact is that, even though there were no chiefs between them, we would be able to clearly delineate a set of agnatic clans of warriors that mythologically articulate — through the names of different founding brothers — as feuding factions between themselves. This made it so that no central political authority could alienate power from the community to itself, but it also meant that the unity of collective work was accompanied by a cleavage in customary affinity.

Furthermore, the prohibition of incest also made it so the marriage structure of Nuer customs considered the marriage between members of the same agnatic feuding clan a taboo. What follows from this is that men from each “agnatic vengeance group” were compelled to seek in other agnatic groups for their own wives and, consequently, these groups’ family members were territorially scattered throughout the tribes. “The loyalty of agnates to one another, so strongly enforced by custom, conflicts with other customary allegiances to other groups and persons. [...] **Hence the whole system depends for its cohesion on the existence of conflicts in smaller subsystems**” (our bold). However, if these agnatic feuding warriors formed an aristocracy, there was still, arguably, a more fundamental character — even if he had virtually no “forceful powers of coercion”. This role had both the capacity to punish and to bestow peace and was called by the Nuer as the **man of the earth**. His mystical capabilities of connection with the dead conferred him the ability to curse or cure the man in homicidal state while his mystical connections with earth’s fertility conferred him a special collective status and the ability to transcend the division of territorial distance of the clans. The man of the earth is an agent of “recognition of moral rights in the community [...] [and] acts as mediator between warring sections”. We might say that he becomes a ritualistic condenser of the contradictions in the **fission and fusion** logic of the Nuer tribes. The first moment of this particular logic (fission) inhibits the emergence of transcendent political power while the latter (fusion) reproduces social cohesion from within the common land. Without the necessary force of mediation of this fundamental ambivalence, we can speculate that either political alienation or a generalized state of war would promptly take place. The recurring specter of this ambivalence, as Stephen D. White has formulated, could be named as the **Invisible Hand of Custom** [2].

3. Peace and feud in Europe

While dealing with feud in a tribal context, Gluckman had already anticipated the use of his research on European medieval territories. “I believe it would be profitable to apply these analyses to those periods of European history when the feud was still apparently the main instrument for redress of injury”. “The study of **stateless societies may thus give a model** for interpreting the surviving fragments of evidence about our own historical past” (our bold) [3]. Interestingly enough, the precursor for the study of European feud as more than mere irrationality, Otto Brunner, did it from a very distinct theoretical framework (the framework of conceptual history). Brunner asserted that a clear distinction between private and public warfare did not exist and that this ambiguous form of warfare was structured through a recognizable set of basic concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) that established a constitution (*Verfassung*). Among these concepts of medieval Germany was the concept of feud itself (*Fehde*, that could be translated as “**enmity**” and/or “**legal vengeance**”). According to

Brunner, only the noblemen could legitimately participate in the dynamics of feuding; they were the ones who could initiate feud through a letter of defiance and provide lordly protection (*Schutz und Schirm*) while the non-noble could only become a criminal defier (*Absager*). Furthermore, nobles were represented as seeking “**retribution and vengeance in order to restore the broken order of Right**” (our bold) insofar as taking vengeance was the same as “to compel [a rival noble] either to accept the challenger’s version of Right, or to seek arbitration or to lodge a judicial complaint, or, in certain conditions, to offer battle” [4].

Even if already surpassed, this hermeneutics laid out a lot of the problems of the late medieval European feud. We may, now, concisely delineate some basic distinctive features of the study of European feud as the following: 1) we are talking about societies in which economic stratification is developing and/or spreading at an accelerated rate; 2) these societies are going through the emergence of centralizing political institutions that generally attempt to operate as **external feud/peace makers**; 3) the opposing groups in a feud are not necessarily cross-cut by cognatic kinship and, in fact, the exact opposite was often the truth; 4) the economic hierarchies and political institutions that structure these societies often contradict between themselves (even if they are often complementary) through the opposition of an aristocratic *habitus* of feuding for power and honor with an *ethos* of the court and/or of the church that worked for juridical and institutional sublimation of feuding as a means of acquiring its own power. As Joel T. Rosenthal wrote [5], the paradigm of the peace in the feud allows for “a method whereby a society without strong central [...] government sought to achieve **balance between its centrifugal and its centripetal elements**” (our bold) while also adding that, in Europe, “divisive aspects of the feud constantly threatened any social ties which sought to **transcend family groupings**” (our bold). It is important to state that, even though we will discover that feud could also be used for (and not only against) these tendentially transcendent social ties, it is undeniable that such ties existed at least as developing forces in late medieval Europe.

4. Problems in the feud

It should be noted, however, that the metabolization of the notion of peace in the feud in a late medieval European context of historiography did not happen without any mishaps. Indeed, as Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm will synthesize, there are at least five fundamental historiographical problems which will determine the transformations and discussions that Gluckman’s Invisible Hand of Custom and its feuding logic of fission and fusion will undergo. We will, now, succinctly delineate them in a logical order [6]. To start off, we ought to recognize that feud is not a transcendent object that exists somewhere outside the world and that would, as such, have particular modes of expression. Therefore, the change of object

of inquiry will necessarily present resistance to the notion of peace in the feud and, consequently, the notion itself will undergo changes of clarification and specification. Secondly, as a direct consequence of this first problem, the study of feud in the context of the Italian *vendetta* demonstrated that investigations of feuds in the realm of the *événementielle* and through a narratological approach will often reveal feud as “not just a social phenomenon for resolving group conflict or a form of primitive justice but a medium of collective memory, a way of structuring clan history around deeds of infamy and of valor” [7]. These first two problems of conceptual application are emblematic of three approaches to the problem of conceptualization of feud itself. One approach states that a stringent and narrow definition of the feud (as it is done by cross-cultural anthropology) will always fail at capturing the broader historical relevance of the feud because it will be necessarily overdetermined by the particular object of inquiry of the research in question. This approach proposes that — rather than a perfect definition — we should attempt a descriptive delineation of the tendencies of feuding. Such an attempt should be considered a descriptive one. The next approach says that neither a definition nor a description will suffice to give feud its proper dimension: we should, rather, abandon these attempts as a whole and restrict ourselves to the analysis of specific feuding phenomena so as to avoid the belief of a pure feuding form. Such an attempt should be considered a phenomenological one. The last approach proposes an abandonment of the concept of feud to start from a clean slate. This approach is considered a revisionist one.

It is of our opinion that the concept of feud should be maintained through a specific articulation of the descriptive approach and the phenomenological approach. That is, the strive for the universality of the understanding of the feud through a plasticization of the previously purely functional definition of the feud and its subjacent peacemaking process is a legitimate strive insofar as we give space to the phenomena and its historical data to come back to our descriptive efforts and retroactively transform it. We ought to recognize that **there is a feud in the peace in the feud**. Although concepts are always precarious as they are historically determined and bring about a certain semantic weight to them, we should not try to play the substitution game until we find a neutral — which is to say, non-existent — word but to work from within the **contradictions and spectrums** feud itself imposes on our attempts to inscribe it. That being said, we can quickly present a conceptualization based on Helgi Þorláksson’s attempt of doing it and then confront it with *in loco* analysis of feuding situations [8]. We must begin by saying that feud is a state between two individuals and/or groups which may arise from minor causes, but which custom compels to the development of a conflictuous situation between the parties involved. The conflict becomes a feud when violence is brought into use and from this point onward violent acts are intercalated between each party. These acts can range from damage of property to personal assaults,

and they are structured as a turn-based repaying response of the acts of each party which gradually escalates in violence as much as the original issue of contention becomes continually less significant to the feud. If/when an individual is killed it can be said that a bloodfeud has developed (as the apex of the feuding process). At last — given the mutual concern with customary honor — adversaries are prevented from seeking peace settlements unless internal and/or external feud-disrupting events take place and promote reconciliation.

5. Germany and Bohemia

Feuding is generally regarded as having an important influence in the relational developments between custom, security, enmity, friendship, and state development. Still, the exact manner in which this happens is yet quite nebulous. One of the most prominent understandings of these relational developments interprets feud as a problem for state formation which was negated by an external state led process of civilizing vengeance. However, historical analysis of the role that feud plays in state formation often begs to differ. Two geographically proximate historical situations in which we can see the problem with the **civilizing process** theory of vengeance are the cases of late medieval Bohemian and German development of centralized political power.

Beginning with the case of Bohemia, we can resort to the description by Beran Zdeněk of its securitization [9]. What we find in this case is the process of development of a notion of public peace (*Landfriede*) and the concomitant development of practices we ought to deem as **Landfrieden-endeavors**. This normative notion of the public peace and their corresponding practices structured a process of territorial securitization that led to a progressive political centralization and institutionalization of feud which sterilized and restrained it as time went on. Paradoxically, the agents who were the most intimately connected with the *habitus* of feuding were precisely the ones who most contributed to this process and not the other way around. Briefly speaking, in order to put an end to the exhaustive domestic war inside Bohemia and lead “land and the people inhabitants of that kingdom [...] in **peace and unity and concord**” (our bold), the organized aristocracy decided to “restore the authority of the provincial court of justice **as ancient custom is**” (our bold). “The legal regulation of the feud [thus] emerged as a reflection of the political aspirations and interests of the elites for the pacification of the land for which control of violence represented a more effective instrument than feud itself”. Consequently, we can allow ourselves to conclude that the entanglement of the agents of feuding with the “**politicization of feud became a power tool for the emerging states**” (our bold) which would — given this process — negate these very agents through the struggle of violence-monopolization.

This process of self-capturing of the agents of feuding and their correspondent binding to centralized

political institutions — these dialectics of feuds for and against the state, we might rephrase — is also present in the exposition of the role of feuding in the Germanic context, by Hilla Zmora [10]. First, he argues that princes “saw no contradiction between feuding and their duty to provide good government” and that, furthermore, nobles still played a central role in this activity: so much so that their identity was at stake in this realm of social life and, as such, their self-representation and political position would shift in correspondence to the shifts in feuding. Zmora will then explain these **dialectics of the feuds for and against princes** through the mediations of two fundamental models of relation between noblemen, feuding, and princes that will begin to articulate and contradict with one another. Interestingly enough, from the friction between these two first models, other models started to emerge: it is the case of the series of tournaments called Four Lands that began in 1479 (built from noble confraternities and not by princes). This event marked the development of **supra-regional political structures** that requested for independence from the will of the princes but that, paradoxically, needed princes for its success. “In effect, they contrived to put themselves, in some respects, on equal footing with the princes” while, simultaneously, reframing what meant to be a noble through increasingly institutionalized means. The apex of this institutionalization was the Imperial Knighthood, and it changed the model of noble membership to a formal one: the autonomy model, in which one was a noble by virtue of belonging to the Imperial Knighthood. Even though feuding did not stop and even intensified when they were made against princes it was the autonomy model which created the **compulsion not to feud**. “Ironically, both the autonomy model and the reputation model had the same foundation: interdependence between noblemen. The difference was that in the autonomy model this independence was no longer primarily social and diffuse: it was political”. In this sense, to oppose the princes’ political and legal manipulation of noblemen interdependence through feuding and to guarantee their independence from those princes, noblemen came up with a political restructuring which negated one of the essential aspects of their own identity: “the nobles initiated a political process that brought the feud under tighter control, exercised by the nobles themselves”. Thus, the noble feuds against political centralization became a noble negation of feud that made political centralization structure itself on an unprecedented level.

6. Societies against the state

Before we dive into the feuding of Latin American tribes and to its critical comparison with the preceding notion of peace in the feud, we should first elaborate on what Pierre Clastres conceptualized as **societies against the state** [11]. Without further ado, we should define societies against the state as a critical notion which deconstructs the ontological presupposition that sociability is only complete when it has a state and, therefore, has writing, an

economy, and, in short, is a civilization. Pierre Clastres negates this purely negative notion of the Savage to discover the immanent mechanisms which interdicts the emergence of alienated/centralized power. Yet, to sustain this statement, he needs to first answer: where does power come from? The answer to this question is not found in the accumulation of wealth by a dominant class. The tribes of Latin America devoted a surprisingly little amount of time with what we call work while the rest of their time was reserved for occupations experienced not as pain but as pleasure: hunting and fishing; festively consuming; dancing, singing, and painting; “and finally [...] satisfying their passionate liking for warfare”. They are not societies with economies of subsistence but societies of “the **refusal of a useless excess**” (our bold). “That force without which the Savages would never surrender their leisure, [...] which destroys society insofar as it is primitive society, is the [...] the political power. [...] **Alienation is political before it is economic**” (our bold). While it is not yet possible to clearly determine the conditions in which state emerges, it is possible to give the specific conditions for its non-emergence by analyzing the nature of the tribal chief; a chief who does not become a chief of state.

It is immanently impossible for the chief’s authority to become a power of coercion: the “space of the chieftainship is not the locus of power”. He is responsible for peacemaking through alliances and from within the group by the capacity of fluent speech and for leading the group to victory in warfare by the capacity of strength and strategy: “the chief’s word carries no force of law” outside of what is customarily expected. Tragically, however, there will be times in which the chief will have no other choice but to try to do so “and [it is] not out of Machiavellian motives”. “Everything hinges on just that separation maintained by the society between power and prestige, between fame and victorious warrior and the command that he is forbidden to exercise. [...] A warrior has no choice: he is obliged to desire war”. “Death is the warrior’s destiny, for, primitive society is such that it does not permit the desire for prestige to be replaced by the will to power”. The chief will eventually go into battle by himself and perish in his abandonment: feuds will then temporarily cease until another chief tries to do the same. Furthermore, a similar structuring of the warrior tribe activity can be found in Batailles’ analysis of the **gift of rivalry** [12], that is, the ritual of *potlatch*. This activity consists in the violent destruction of accumulated riches by a chief on the sight of a rival tribe. Such tribe is symbolically humiliated by their rival’s chief superiority in his display of excessive expenditure and becomes obliged to respond with a more intense act of consumption: “what it brings to the giver is not the inevitable increase of return gifts; it is the rank which it confers to the one who has the last word. Prestige, glory and rank should not be confused with power [...] [they express] a movement of senseless frenzy, of **measureless expenditure of energy, which the fervor of combat presupposes**” (our bold). It is

clear that *potlatch* unites both the desire not to accumulate but to establish “waste itself an object of acquisition” and the warrior infinite desire for glory as a form of status which differs from political power.

Moreover, according to Pierre Clastres [13], there is a silencing of the role of violence in primitive societies by modern anthropology. Such a silencing ended up producing an erasure of two invariant aspects of tribal societies recognized until then: the bellicose desire for feuding and the recurrent figure of the warrior. In actuality, “primitive societies are violent societies: **their social being is a being-for-war**. [...] It thus seems well established that one cannot think of primitive society without also thinking of war which [...] **takes on a dimension of universality**” (our bold). It is interesting, however, that the exchange discourse (which was developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss) understands that “war and commerce are activities that are impossible to study in isolation. [...] Commercial exchanges represent potential wars peacefully resolved and wars are the outcome of unfortunate transactions” [14]. In this sense, it is not only that those are intrinsically linked aspects of a unified social process but also that commerce holds a sociological and ontological priority to feuding; commerce is at the heart of social being and feuding would be a distortion of this essence. If Lévi-Strauss later abandons this theory, it is because this model wholly ignores a fundamental aspect of the Domestic Mode of Production: the ideal of autarchy and self-sufficiency which are anti-commercial ideals. We must, in order to understand primitive tribal feuding, subvert the notion of feud activity as a failure without falling into Hobbesian territory of pre-social warfare. **“Hobbes left out exchange, Lévi-Strauss leaves out war”** (our bold).

Segmentation is not to be considered as a side-effect of feuding. Feuding is the means through which the tribes reach segmentation as a positive goal; feuding “is at once the cause of and the means to a sought-after effect and end, the segmentation of primitive society”. The territory is not only the ecological basis for material reproduction of tribal societies but also the basis of assertion of rights and of differentiation from the reciprocal figure of the Other. The primitive community has an imperative to be a unified and autonomous totality which refuses to lose its homogeneity and forbids alienation by a transcendent One. Furthermore, it “is precisely the Other as mirror — the neighboring groups — who reflect back onto the community the image of its unity and totality”. In this sense, primitive societies feel the strange desire to be an undivided monad called We which resides within a multiplicity of other monads that reaffirms this ordering of the Savage world. The difference from Hobbes’ theory of state of nature appears because “the impossibility of war of all against all for a given community immediately classifies the people surrounding it. Others are immediately classified into friends and enemies”. If we ask: “why does a primitive society need allies? The answer is obvious: because it has enemies [...] **war relates first to alliance; war as an institution**

determines alliance as a tactic” (our bold). Gluckman’s theory, here, is expanded upon. Alliance does not deter feud; it is feud (as the ultimate goal) which produces its own deterrent from falling into an infinite destructive process. There is alliance because there is feud and “there is exchange because there is alliance”; feud “thus, involves alliance; alliance founds exchange”. Feuding in primitive societies must then be understood as the **centrifugal logic of separation** which negates the exchange as the driving force in primitive societies while also subverts the Hobbesian notion that state is against the feud: it is rather the feud which is primordially against the state without ever becoming anomic.

7. Enmity in Brazilian tribes

We should add, before arriving at a conclusion, a small note on the culture of enmity in Brazilian tribes: a culture of the **immanence of the enemy**, according to Bruce Albert, Davi Kopenawa, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro [15] [16]. Without further ado, we should attempt to understand the (in)compatibilities of our previous description of the feud and the Yanomami feuding practices. The first aspect which becomes eminent is that, although we find an escalation of the feud, the bloodfeud is taken for granted: there’s always already a *ōnokae* subject (a subject in homicidal state), since the warrior child *Ōeōeri*, *Arowë*, the brave, and the fearsome spirit *Aiamori* of the primordial times. The rivalry imposes on a tribe the need to make man hunting incursions of the *ōnokae* subject which are incited by the grief and desire for vengeance of the deceased’s family through a cremation ritual called *reahu*. This ritual will be repeated until the avenging warriors acquire **reciprocity** and become *ōnokae* subjects themselves. Finally, this altercation will continue until all subjects with the warrior braveness called *waithiri* are killed: point from which the women of the rival tribes will re-establish friendship through a form of conciliating dialogue called *remimuu*. Yet, there’s still an aspect which cannot be easily articulated with our previous description of the feud if we do not consider the necessity of the fission of feuds’ centripetal force in societies against the state: we are talking about the incorporation of the spirits of **hunger of human meat** (the *naikiari*) by the Yanomami avenger.

The best case through which this dimension of feud is brought up can be found in an analysis of the role of enmity in the Araweté tribes. Their mythology states that the *Mai-hete* (“gods as such”) are just like *bide* (“us” or “humanity”) but are also *awin herin* (“like enemies”); their image is a synthesis between the adornments of the Araweté and of their enemies. In fact, the *Mai* are known to be anthropophagic deities which, more specifically, are *ure tiwā oho* (“our potentially fearsome giants”) insofar as the *tiwā* is close to an *awin* but whose status includes a possible alliance; the *Mai* expresses a fundamental ambivalence of the ideal of the Ego and the archetype of the Other. Indeed, if the *Mai* eat the Araweté’s deceased (as they desire for the Araweté) but throw

their enemy's deceased back into the profane realm to perish, a very different destiny awaits the *awin* who are killed by an Araweté. When a Araweté kills an enemy, his soul becomes a *moropĩ'nã* soul (a soul of the "killer"): incorporation makes his body full of *awin* blood, he incessantly vomits in rejection of this unification, and he is interdicted of exchanging with his tribe and wife. This process ends and a revolution happens when the soul of the *awin* travels in search of songs and comes back as the *moropĩ'nã's* singing teacher as well as a name giver to the tribes' children. From this point onwards he becomes the killer's *apihi-pihã*: the highest form of Araweté friendship, which includes a sharing of the wives. It is also from this moment onwards that he becomes a complex fusion of *bide* and *awin* called *Iraparadi*, a god among men, feared even by the *Mai*, who will refuse to cannibalize this ideal, that is, dual Araweté. However, interestingly enough, if the *Iraparadi* is admired and respected he is also feared and alienated from the rest of the tribe who are *marin-in me'e* ("harmless"); he is seen as a **being-for-itself** and as such he needs to be isolated and very cautiously observed. A much more vital, social, position is the role of the *peye* (the "shaman"), who is a representative of the living to the *Mai*. The *peye* is a mediator and a communicator who is necessarily a **being-for-the-group** (much like the Nuer's man of the earth). Here we can see again that, in societies against the state, fusion is captured by fission as the overdetermining aspect of the logic of feud but that — given that the warrior becomes avid for prestige — there ought to be a form of restraining mechanism which will interdict him from alienating vengeance from the undivided We that is the tribe.

8. Conclusions

We conclude that there are feuds for unity but also against unity and that this fact is strictly related to a spectrum of fission and fusion in its logic. That is, beyond any positive descriptions of the feud, we might start to discover, from here on out, a **spectrum of peace in the feud based on the relation of the feud to the transcendent One**. It is of our opinion that this voyage of the feud from a tribal context to a state developing context and back to a tribal context demonstrated the universality of the Invisible Hand of Custom as a social rationality of the feud's fission and fusion and its relation to peace. Could it be, as Clastres has put it, that the political superstructure has a historical and social primacy over the economic infrastructure? Well, in both cases (societies against the state and for the state) the One seems to attempt to emerge through the very negation of the emerging One, and, moreover, through (anti)political means. In one case it is successful, in the other it is not, but the feuding warrior and his invariably ambivalent role on (in)security is always there. This voyage of the feud seems to beg us for further research on the mechanisms and differences of this process through historiographical and anthropological means.

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