**Headline:** How Humanity Can Realistically Prevent War From Ever Happening Again

**Teaser:** An interview with anthropologist Douglas P. Fry on how societies that operate within peace systems avoid war and create positive intergroup relationships—and what this might mean for humanity’s future.

By April M. Short

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**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** History, Interview, War, Climate Change, Environment, Indigenous Resistance, North America/United States of America, Europe, Europe/Finland, Europe/The Netherlands, Europe/Sweden, Europe/Norway, Europe/France, Europe/Germany, Europe/Italy, Europe/United Kingdom, Europe/Russia, North America/Mexico, Economy, Community

**[Article Body:]**

We live in a time in which we face many global challenges, including the climate disaster, dwindling biodiversity (due to international industrial practices), polluted oceans, nuclear proliferation and a worldwide pandemic, just for starters. Realistic solutions to the hurdles humanity faces will require international cooperation—which will require the adoption of viable alternatives to the predominant systems of conflict and war.

While conflict and war have written much of modern human history, they offer an incomplete narrative. Anthropological evidence suggests war is not innate to humanity, as detailed in a recent [Independent Media Institute (IMI) article](https://www.laprogressive.com/war-is-not-innate/) on the topic. Further, war can be successfully stopped and can be prevented in the future when societies shift their cultures and values and adopt intentional systems of peace, or what are now called peace systems, due in large part to the work of anthropologist Douglas P. Fry. Fry, a [professor and chair of the department of peace and conflict studies](https://hhs.uncg.edu/pcs/people/fry-douglas-p/) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has studied existing clusters of neighboring societies that do not make war with each other, and how they operate, for years. These peace systems exist both in smaller, Indigenous groups like Brazil’s Upper Xingu River Basin tribes and Aboriginal Australians, as well as in larger societies, the most obvious modern example being the European Union (EU)—a peace system which would have been assumed impossible, even ridiculous, just decades prior to its adoption.

Fry says peace systems like the EU demonstrate the ability for peace to eclipse systems of war.

“Today, the idea of the European nations waging war with each other is absurd,” he says. Fry notes that humans are flexible, and sweeping changes in the way we operate are the rule, rather than the exception.

Fry was one of the leading authors of an article published on January 18, 2021, in the scientific journal Nature titled “[Societies Within Peace Systems Avoid War and Build Positive Intergroup Relationships](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00692-8).” It offers a comparative anthropological perspective to demonstrate not only that some human societies avoid war but also that peaceful social systems exist—and they work.

The article’s abstract states:

“The mere existence of peace systems is important because it demonstrates that creating peaceful intergroup relationships is possible whether the social units are tribal societies, nations, or actors within a regional system. Peace systems have received scant scientific attention despite holding potentially useful knowledge and principles about how to successfully cooperate to keep the peace. Thus, the mechanisms through which peace systems maintain peaceful relationships are largely unknown.”

The study’s authors hypothesized that there are certain factors known to contribute to intergroup peace and demonstrated that those factors are more developed within peace systems than elsewhere. These factors include:

* Overarching common identity
* Positive social interconnectedness
* Interdependence
* Non-warring values and norms
* Non-warring myths, rituals, and symbols
* Peace leadership

The study explains that “a machine learning analysis found non-warring norms, rituals, and values to have the greatest relative importance for a peace system outcome.” The findings of the analysis of peace systems also show that they may have policy implications regarding “how to promote and sustain peace, cohesion, and cooperation among neighbouring societies in various social contexts, including among nations. For example, the purposeful promotion of peace system features may facilitate the international cooperation necessary to address interwoven global challenges such as global pandemics, oceanic pollution, loss of biodiversity, nuclear proliferation, and climate change,” the study abstract states.

April M. Short, reporting for IMI, recently interviewed Doug P. Fry about his work studying peace systems and their potentially global implications.

**April M. Short:** How did you first come to study alternatives to war, and what made you begin to question the predominant narratives around humans and war (which have typically assumed war is a given)?

**Douglas P. Fry:** This goes way back for me. I was a teenager toward the end of the Vietnam War, and in that time period I certainly picked up on the movements against the Vietnam War. Unlike more recent wars, there were, on the nightly news, pictures of bodies, Vietcong bodies, civilian bodies and American troops who’d been killed in combat. War was really ugly, and it came onto our TV sets. As a young person, I realized that I was going to turn 18 in a couple of years, and that really pushed me to a personal set of reflections. “Would I really engage in a war that I felt was wrong?” That was one. Then, much more philosophically, or deeply, I asked myself, “Could I really find it within myself to kill another human being?”

I went through exploration by reading and talking to a few friends, and talking to my father, who was very supportive, and reached the decision that I should apply for a conscientious objector status (and the military ultimately classified me as 1-H; H is for holding. It was like I was in limbo, and if they needed more troops, they would call me up, but they never did). At about the same time, I started university at UCLA and I discovered anthropology, and it has been a love affair ever since. I think anthropology is just a wonderful field… it takes into consideration all the world’s cultures and what it means to be human. It asks, where did we come from in the past, and what’s our nature, and so forth. For me, in particular, the guiding question was, at first, to understand human aggressiveness and the violence of war, and then I morphed over the decades to try to understand how we can get rid of war. What actions can we take as alternatives? How can we promote peace? How can we promote nonviolent forms of conflict resolution to deal with our differences without war?

**AMS:** How did you eventually come to study systems of peace and intergroup cooperation, or peace systems?

**DPF:** Around 2000, I realized that in anthropology there were not really any central books that dealt in a holistic or complete way with peace. So, I formulated a scheme to study peace (and eventually systems of peace). I was living in Finland at the time and working part-time. I thought, “I’ve got the ideas, I’ve got the time, this is an opportunity.” I started working on a book that eventually became [*The Human Potential for Peace*](https://www.amazon.com/Human-Potential-Peace-Anthropological-Assumptions/dp/0195181786#:~:text=In%20The%20Human%20Potential%20for,and%20the%20potential%20for%20peace.). For that book, I was reading avidly about internally peaceful societies and conflict resolution across cultures. I was thinking about archaeology and delving into the question of, “[How old is war?](https://www.laprogressive.com/war-is-not-innate/)” I was also looking at evolutionary theory and doing a bit of a critique of some of the primatological work that Brian Ferguson mentions [in your recent interview](https://www.laprogressive.com/war-is-not-innate/).

Out of this exploration, I came across the work of [Thomas Gregor](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/anthropology/bio/thomas-gregor), who is one of many anthropologists whohad worked with societies in Brazil’s Upper Xingu River Basin. What Gregor nicely summed up was that there are about 10 tribes there that have four different language groups represented, and that they are a peace system. He used that term, “peace system,” and I just thought that was very cool. In chapter two of *The Human Potential for Peace* I gave a pretty thorough review of all of Gregor’s work, as well as other anthropologists who had studied the region—and I mention this because it’s rather unusual when you find a rich description from different people and they all pretty much correspond with each other over decades and over sources. These Upper Xingu River Basin societies really do not engage in warfare with each other.

They don’t like violence. They perceive themselves as civilized, and morally superior to neighboring Indigenous groups that do engage in warfare because they don’t believe in killing people. Now, they will engage in warfare to protect themselves, so they’re not total pacifists, but they are non-warring among themselves. And that’s the key way to define peace systems, or at least that’s the way I’ve done it across a series of articles: clusters of societies that don’t make war with each other. Sometimes they don’t make war at all, but sometimes they do make war outside the system.

I enjoyed reading everything I could find on these societies and writing it up for chapter two, and that’s how I discovered peace systems. Since that time, I’ve made many personal moves between different countries, different jobs, and focuses for my work, but I always somehow come back to peace systems. It happened that in 2014, I was invited by a colleague, [Peter Coleman](https://sps.columbia.edu/faculty/peter-t-coleman), who’s an eminent peace psychologist and social psychologist at Columbia University, to be part of a project he was launching on [mapping sustainable peace](https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2020/november/mapping-sustainable-peace/), now called the [Sustaining Peace Project](https://ac4.earth.columbia.edu/content/sustaining-peace-project). I was a core member there, and my wife, [Geneviève Souillac](https://hhs.uncg.edu/pcs/people/souillac-genevieve/), is involved with the project as well. Early in 2014, I was considering how I could really contribute to this as an anthropologist. I went home after the first day of meeting for the project and woke up thinking: “Peace systems, of course!”

That was really the birth of the [article](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8) in Nature. You’ll notice there’s a whole team that worked on that article, including my former students who collected a lot of the data and coded it. My wife, Geneviève Souillac, and I have been talking about, and thinking and writing on, this subject since we’ve known each other… Peter generated and pushed the button to start the whole thing by starting up this sustaining peace project and including us. It was very labor-intensive to find all these societies and code all this data. Here we are literally six years later, and it has finally come out in print.

**AMS:** In the article, it is noted that not only do some human societies not engage in war, but peaceful social systems or peace systems exist. Will you clarify the difference between simply an absence of war between groups and societies that actively engage in peace?

**DPF:** This is an interesting point. In peace studies, we sometimes talk about negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is simply the absence of violence or the absence of war, and, therefore, there’s peace. Sort of what the person on the street tends to think is, “Oh, we’re at peace for now,” or, “War is coming; we’re now at war.” That’s a negative definition of peace, in peace studies.

Then there are all sorts of variations on what we call positive peace. These would include the positive elements, so not simply the opposites of violence. These are things such as people having equal rights or access to resources; being part of decision-making for the group (and democracy would be one model for this; another might be nomadic foragers who were egalitarian and made decisions out of discussion and consensus). Having your basic needs taken care of is generally thought to be positive peace, so things like safe drinking water, enough to eat, and access to health care. In a way, if you start ticking the boxes for what is a good life, in terms of having your needs taken care of and living safely and happily, that’s where a whole variety of different positive peace elements come in.

For this [article](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8) in Nature, I remember my wife and I were talking and discussing peace systems a year ago. She was telling me, “We’ve got to make really clear this distinction between positive and negative peace. The definition that you started with is a negative definition of these clusters.”

She was absolutely right, and I hadn’t thought of it that way. My next thought was that what we are actually looking at are the conditions and features that lead to a peace system.

There are some societies where it has just been noted in the literature that they don’t engage in warfare, and there are different ways to look at this. There’s been a big presumption on the part of anthropologists and others, as part of the traditional view, that, of course, everybody engages in warfare.

One interesting reflection of this, historically, is this monumental work done during World War II, by political scientist [Quincy Wright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quincy_Wright) and a whole team of scholars. When they looked at ethnographic data from many different angles that they pursued in the study of war, they only used four classifications for the different types of societies, for almost 600 societies. They said a society could either engage in warfare because it was a social phenomenon or economic phenomenon or political phenomenon, or defensive, and they classified it as defensive for only about 5 percent of those societies. In their descriptions, they said these people are not particularly warlike, but if they had encountered a fighting force, no doubt, they would have used their simple tools and their digging sticks to fight back and defend themselves. Hence, the label they put on these societies: defensive war.

I went through some of these “defensive war” societies. I looked at enough of them to realize that some and maybe all of them really were non-warring societies. And there had been a misclassification because of the starting presumption that all societies make war. There was no category called non-warring societies. That was one thing that I just found psychologically and historically pretty interesting as an apparent bias. And it was, otherwise, a very carefully done, and monumental, study of war.

What I did in writing [*The Human Potential for Peace*](https://www.amazon.com/Human-Potential-Peace-Anthropological-Assumptions/dp/0195181786#:~:text=In%20The%20Human%20Potential%20for,and%20the%20potential%20for%20peace.) is I started collecting a list of non-warring societies. And to classify them as such, it had to be very clear that they did not engage in warfare—the ethnographers or the historians had to really spell this out, I wasn’t just taking vague statements like “these were peace-loving people.” I came up with 74 examples, across different types of social organizations, of non-warring societies. So, most societies do partake in some sort of collective, violent engagement with other societies, but some do not. The difference there is that peace systems really are clusters. They could be as few as say three societies, or they could be 27, as with the European Union. They are a given number of clusters of neighboring societies that don’t engage in war with each other.

Many of the non-warring societies might exist as members of a peace system, or they might be somewhat isolated in some cases, or it could be ethnographically or historically unclear as to how many societies they were in contact with. There is a wealth of further studies that need to be done, and could be done, on non-warring societies and peace systems. We’re just touching the tip of the iceberg with our 16 examples of peace systems that we talk about in the [recent article](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8). What we have is a relatively small, well-described number of peace systems. Then we’ve got a larger number of societies that are just being reported by historians or anthropologists as non-warring. They sort of overlap, but that would be the distinction or the difference.

**AMS:** In the [article](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8), you hypothesize a list of features present in societies that contribute to peace systems. One of these is “overarching common identity.” Would you explain that a bit further?

**DPF:** In working on the Nature [article](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8), these different features that would promote peace came to mind as hypotheses, based on the social science literature as well as our studies of existing peace systems. These include things such as having an overarching identity, not just a parochial identity. Rather than just identifying, for example, as, “I’m a Finn,” it’s, “I’m a Finn, *and* I’m a European.” And that is happening in the EU as we speak. The idea is, there’s this overall identity where people perceive themselves as Europeans.

Another example of a peace system is the United States (which is in some ways sort of a problematic one, because we did have a civil war in the middle of the country’s history, among other issues)… but what’s really telling to me is that when we were still 13 colonies and fighting that Revolutionary War and then grappling with what the way forward would be, people’s identities were connected with that of the former colonies. People identified with their states. People from Virginia were Virginians and people from Georgia were Georgians, and that was their primary identity. At some point, this all shifted to include this higher level of identity of being American.

Overarching identity is just one of the features of positive peace, and it’s a really important factor that promotes positive peace and a peace system. As you know from the [article](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8), there are others that we discuss as potential factors, and we could probably come up with a few other ones in addition to them.

**AMS:** I read the chapter you co-authored with your wife, Geneviève Souillac, for Ronald Edsforth’s *A Cultural History of Peace in the Modern Age (1920-present)*, which was titled “Human Nature, Peace, and War in the Modern Era Since 1920.” In the chapter, you break down and confront the classic narrative of human history that says war is basically human nature and explain that this is a perspective that is at least as old as Greek civilization. What made you think to challenge the common assumptions around war and human nature?

**DPF:** I tend to take a very holistic view, as does my wife, meaning we look at information interdisciplinarily as much as we can. Now, the common theme for that particular chapter is on history, but there is also the thesis that we could take a totally new perspective. The dominant perspective is just steeped in Western tradition and it’s basically not supported by evidence. That leads to the question, “What evidence are you talking about?” In the chapter you mention, we thought it would be good to just give a rather brief and understandable sampling of the various types of evidence that you can find across sub-disciplines, and across the disciplines that really support a totally new way of looking at humanity that’s not in accordance with the traditional view. We look at evidence for nomadic foragers and ask whether or not they are warlike, and to what degree, and what sort of violence they practice. The reason anthropologists look at nomadic foragers is because we as a human species have lived as nomadic foragers for almost our entire existence.

In getting at human nature questions, there’s going to be a mix of genes and environment, or nature and nurture and so forth to consider. We acknowledge epigenetics—the term used to consider gene-environment interaction—and in this case it plays into the way we live, the types of societies we lived in and the physical environments along with the social environments (both of which are important to take into consideration). So we consider, “How are we in the so-called state of nature?” The answer, shortly put, is that nomadic foragers are not particularly warlike. They’re very egalitarian. They have a lot of space and low population density, and because they move around, they don’t have material possessions. They don’t really have much to fight over.

Then, of course, another line to look at is archaeology. In the traditional view, they usually acknowledge, somewhat begrudgingly, that there’s [no real evidence](https://www.laprogressive.com/war-is-not-innate/) of warfare back beyond roughly 10,000 years ago, which is about the time agriculture started to come in. If you look at archaeology, the evidence really isn’t there for war forever backward, as Brian Ferguson likes to put it.

What some of the proponents of the traditional view say is that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and I recall that was in the [IMI [article](https://www.laprogressive.com/war-is-not-innate/) with Brian Ferguson] and Ferguson explained that that’s not a scientific claim because you can’t disprove it, which I thought was a lovely point. There are also multiple sequences around the planet that show the origins of war, so if you think about it, the evidence sort of undermines this whole idea that war is ancient. If it had evolved long ago and always been with us, then why do we find archaeological sequences from Oaxaca, for example, in Mexico, or from several parts of the Northwest coast of America, or from the Kodiak Island area in Alaska and so on that show that there’s a long period of nomadic foraging and no evidence of warfare; then people start settling down and they tend to settle down in specific places where there are resources? They develop surpluses, and this leads to social hierarchy, which is what I’m calling complexity or the complexity complex.

Complexity is new. It has occurred, generally speaking, within the last 12,000 to 13,000 years, at different times and at different places. And it’s often much more recent than that. There may be a few cases that are older than that, but the pattern, which we’ve documented recently, is that when you have nomadic foragers that have become complex and settled down, you’re much more likely to have war there. We can see these origins of war archaeologically, and they are recent, which is a whole other line of evidence in this chapter we wrote [“Human Nature, Peace, and War in the Modern Era Since 1920”].

Then, we can start looking at some other things, like what military science suggests. And there has not been a lot of research in this area, but there have been a few key studies that really are showing how humans and modern military or historical military situations are not really inclined to be so gung-ho for war. It’s not the Hollywood movie that we’ve all been brainwashed with. On the contrary, if you start looking at the evidence during whatever war you pick—let’s take World War II, for instance, there are numerous situations where German troops and U.S. troops understood that the enemy was right nearby, and decided, “We’re not going to shoot at you. You don’t shoot at us. You go your way. We’ll go our way.” There are many of these types of anecdotes, and there is also some more systematic evidence.

In one case that I like, somebody got the idea to examine all of the muskets collected off of the Gettysburg battlefield. I think they collected around 27,000 or so muskets. Many of the muskets were loaded twice, some were loaded thrice and a few were loaded 21 times or something absolutely crazy. Overall, 90 percent of all 27,000 muskets were loaded one or more times. If you work out the statistics around how long it takes to load a musket, and all the time there was a battle going, then if people are loading their musket and firing, you’d expect only about 5 percent to have been loaded. Of course, we don’t have videotapes of what was going on, exactly, but it points to the idea that there was a whole lot of reluctance to actually be shooting at the enemy. Now, that’s just one case from our own U.S. history, and there are others. There is a wonderful, descriptive book written by a military man and historian who served in the U.S. army [during WWII and the Korean War] named S.L.A. Marshall called [*Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*](https://www.amazon.com/Men-Against-Fire-Problem-Command/dp/1095665065) (published in 1947).He did a series of interviews and found out that a vast majority of the combat troops were not firing at the enemy. Some were firing into the air. Some were firing into the bushes. Some were firing over the heads of the enemy. Many weren’t firing at all.

Most scientists are specialists who take on something specific and they try to research it carefully, and that’s valuable. However, when you have larger questions around… human nature and whether or not we are warlike, what makes sense is to draw from all types of information that you can find, from history and prehistory, to social organization and, in this case, military science. What we’re arguing in that chapter you mentioned is these multiple lines of evidence are all pointing in the same direction, and we are arguing that they demonstrate a new paradigm, or at least a new perspective, for looking at war, peace and human nature. Of course, we’re capable as a species of engaging in warfare, that’s obvious—we’re not making some crazy argument that humans don’t war, as we sometimes have been misunderstood as arguing, intentionally or not. That’s silly. We’re just saying that we’re not necessarily inclined toward war, and especially across huge spans of our evolutionary history, there is an absence of war. Therefore, there’s not something built into us, or hardwired into our genes evolutionarily, that pushes us toward warfare.

The application here is: If war is related to social organization, or socializing culture in a broader sense—and other circumstances, like economic factors coming in and complexity, as I was just discussing—then you can design systems where you don’t have warfare. So, here we look back to peace systems once again.

**AMS:** In looking at peace systems that already exist, you’ve factored in smaller-scale tribal societies such as Brazil’s Indigenous tribes and Aboriginal people in Australia. Then, you also look at broader peace systems like the EU. I find that to be significant, that non-warring systems can and do apply on a larger scale to developed-world nations and “aren’t just curiosities of the ethnographic world,” as you put it in your 2009 paper, “[Anthropological Insights for Creating Non-Warring Social Systems](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235293576_Anthropological_insights_for_creating_non-warring_social_systems).” Would you expand a bit on the peace system that is the EU?

**DPF:** Historically, following World War II, people had just been through absolute hell. Just about every European had lost family, friends, colleagues, villagers. Even in small villages in rural France—almost all of them have a monument to those killed in World War I *and* killed in World War II—there’s a list of names, and sometimes you can tell from the surname, they were probably brothers who lost their lives. Everybody was touched by this. Right after World War II in Europe, food shortages and infrastructure—bridges, railroad lines, and everything—had been destroyed. France was on the verge of starvation, at one point and the Dutch went through a starving winter. For five or six years, in some way or another, everybody had suffered the horrors of war, close up and personal.

You had a public who just recently had gone through this catastrophe of a huge magnitude and understood the horrors of war, but they were not really catalyzed to do something creative until [Jean Monnet](https://europa.eu/european-union/sites/europaeu/files/docs/body/jean_monnet_en.pdf), one of the founding fathers of the EU, came in with his message, sharing it with anybody who would listen. He was an influential and very clever man. He talked to people incessantly, he organized a think tank and he lobbied for a unified Europe. He was very explicit about why he was doing this: he was doing it to bring peace and prosperity. And the peace was the first part, after the horrible war. The prosperity was just something that would make sense, and it was easily sellable that you could have a much stronger economic basis and support people better through economic collaboration and cooperation. And all of this has proven to be true in the recent decades, since World War II.

The key idea that Monnet had early on was that we could make a supra-national organization that would be in charge of coal and steel, which were not only the foundational ingredients to warfare but also to a peaceful economy. He realized that across history, France and Germany, in particular, were often at the roots of wars in Europe and that they had access, literally along their border, to steel production and coal mining and so forth. He pulled this off through his magic of convincing, and also due to a willingness of people to try something new.

The first six countries that joined were the [Benelux countries](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Benelux), along with France, Germany, and Italy, which was a good, solid core. The Brits were reluctant—and of course, they’re the ones that have just exited [the EU]. When they tried to get the Brits into the union, they wanted special consideration. This might sound familiar after Brexit. Monnet conferred with the others and they said no, no special consideration for the Brits. It’s, “we’re all in, we’re all equal.” Long story short, as this evolved into the common market, the Brits wanted in, and the EU founders had predicted that would happen.

As I look at the European Union, I see it as a huge success story. I’m putting that label of peace system on it as I don’t know of anybody else who has called it a peace system, but it absolutely is. It’s a cluster of neighboring societies that don’t make war with each other (ever since World War II, that’s been the case). And, like some other peace systems—not all, but some—they have engaged in military expeditions elsewhere (the French going into Mali a few years ago and contributing some troops and forces in Afghanistan and so forth). I’m not making an argument that this is a peace system that is totally pacifist. They have their security forces and different countries, to different degrees, do engage in military expeditions elsewhere. But the key factor is they’ve set up certain structures of economic interdependence, beginning with the coal and steel community and evolving to the Commonwealth, the economic unification of Europe, and then ultimately the European Union. And they are a strong economy. They’re giving the United States and other countries that are strong a real run for their money, economically. It’s a peace economy, in a way. You could look at it that way.

Another great example that overlaps with the European Union is the Nordic countries that are sometimes called [Norden](https://www.norden.org/en). I was reading recently about the first Nordic non-war story where, in 1905, Norway declared its independence from Sweden. Troops lined up on both sides of the border and it looked like Sweden was going to go to war with Norway to keep it as part of Sweden, but that didn’t happen. This became the first Nordic non-war. This whole region, which somewhat overlaps with the EU (but not totally, not all nations are members of the EU), has been at peace for over 200 years now. There have been no wars within this little sub-peace system. And there have been conflicts, but they have evolved a different way of dealing with conflicts. The idea that there would be warfare within the Nordic countries now is basically considered absurd, just as the idea that there would be war in the European Union is considered absurd (Europe is the [most peaceful region on the planet](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/), as is thoroughly documented).

In the case of Norden, the peace system doesn’t have a lot of political bite. It is structured, it exists, there are agreements made in order to be part of it, there are ministers from all countries represented. But it’s more of an agreement to cooperate because that’s the right thing to do. There is a document that’s available to download, from another entity that is supra-international, called the Nordic Council of Ministers, titled “[New Nordic Peace: Nordic Peace and Conflict Resolution Efforts](https://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1302296/FULLTEXT01.pdf).” This document blew me away, in a sense, because it basically argues that there is a “Nordic Peace brand,” internally and externally. It’s pretty cool.

**AMS:** You mentioned peaceful societies, and systems of peace, have typically received scant attention from historians, scientists and the academic world. Why do you think this is? Why has the traditional view been so self-assured that war is always the go-to in human societies?

**DPF:** I think, in part, it is that if you’re so enthralled with looking at conflict, war, aggression and so forth, you don’t look for peace, so you don’t really recognize it. This has been reflected in the records. One of my colleagues in anthropology, Leslie Sponsel at the University of Hawaii, [crunched the numbers](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0392192116648597). He looked at given examples. He did things like, “Let’s look at all these journals and see how many articles are actually on conflict and how many are on peace.” He found that these are really lopsided numbers, like 95 percent on conflict and 5 percent on peace. There are very few articles, relatively speaking, that deal with peace or nonviolence compared to all the ones on genocide and war and abuse and everything else. There’s this academic bias.

I think there is also a person on the street type of bias. Hollywood, of course, has come up with the formula that violence sells, and to my thinking, some of this is because our culture is accustomed to violence. If you have a culture that’s so steeped in violence then, yeah, it sells. You create a self-fulfilling prophecy, generation after generation, by promoting violence as something that’s interesting. I’ll share two things that I think illustrate this idea. First: in one of his popular books, the very famous primatologist [Frans de Waal](https://www.emory.edu/LIVING_LINKS/people/dewaal.shtml) (who is from the Netherlands originally, but he’s lived most of his life in the United States, working as a professor) said that in the Netherlands, people like breasts but are afraid of guns; in the U.S. people are afraid of breasts but love guns. He was comparing the converse values, as a cultural outsider commenting on America.

The second thing I’ll share is about one of the non-warring and extremely internally peaceful societies, the Ifaluk of Micronesia. They are out in the Pacific with a low population density, living on this atoll and having some interaction with neighboring islands. They are extremely peaceful, according to various anthropologists who have described them. [Catherine Lutz](https://watson.brown.edu/people/faculty/lutz) is the most recent anthropologist that I know of to observe them. When she did her fieldwork there, people told her how the United States Navy came by on goodwill visits and anchored their ship off the atoll. They brought projectors onto the beach and set up a screen, and they showed the people these lethal Westerns and other movies that were popular at the time—I think we’re talking 1950s, 1960s.

Catherine Lutz discovered, when she did her fieldwork in the ’80s, that people were traumatized by the films. It literally gave them trauma. Some of them said that they ran away in fear for their life. They refused to watch the movies after they saw what was going on. It led them to ask her questions like, “So in your country, people really do kill each other?” To which, of course, she answered yes. And they were just astounded at this. Three anthropologists that I’ve read, all on this same Ifaluk culture from different time periods, say that they could find no evidence of any rapes or murders. The most serious aggression they saw was when one time a guy was really agitated and put his hand on the shoulder of another guy, which was considered most inappropriate. This non-warring, peaceful Ifaluk culture was traumatized when they saw our Westerns, with people having fistfights and shooting each other with guns (I guess they didn’t quite know what a gun was but they could see the person fall over and the ketchup come out, Hollywood style). I think an extreme case like this just gives us some perspective to reflect back on our own society.

Why have peace systems not been studied? There have been different people who have used the term peace system, but they’ve used it in different ways… When I became really interested in peace systems, I looped in some colleagues, and, hence, we started to approach it systematically for the first time. In 2009, I wrote an [article](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/17596599200900008/full/html) that started by laying out just three of the factors of peace systems in a descriptive way, with no statistics. Then I was invited by Science to write an article called “Life Without War” in 2012. And when one of the reviewers wrote back and said, “This is a science journal, shouldn’t these be hypotheses?” I thought, that’s brilliant. Of course, they should be hypotheses. So, all of a sudden it turned into, at that point, six different hypotheses as to what could contribute to a peace system. That led to the first step toward [the] [study published in Nature in 2021](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00692-8).

So, why are people not interested in peace? My hope, to be honest, is that this online publication in Nature, which is open access, will stir up a lot more interest in peace systems—whether the historical examples or the ethnographic examples. What’s unique about this approach that we’re taking is that people tend not to look at what the similarities are across all types of different cultures, from nomadic bands to modern states or regional entities like the European Union. Instead, people tend to look more locally, either with one pet theory or one model or in some sort of geographical regional context. We’ve really bitten off a huge chunk and tried to look across time and across culture and compare peace systems with non-peace systems, to really try to find out what are the special things that are going on with positive peace and peace systems. Why has somebody not done this before? Fundamentally, I don’t know. But I think it is an area that shows real potential.

**AMS:** In the Nature study, you discuss the idea that the purposeful promotion of peace system features may facilitate international cooperation necessary to address interwoven global challenges such as global pandemics and ocean pollution. Do you think that now is the time when people are ready to look to peace systems and more global, widespread cooperation—because we need these new ways of thinking and looking at solutions to our global catastrophes?

**DPF:** Right. Here we are at this point in history—we’re facing global warming, just to take one example. … I thought it was very interesting, or almost ironic, the number of the peace systems that seem to come into being due to an external military threat of some sort. So, that’s one ingredient here. Perhaps, some groups hang together because then there will be more of them and they’ll be able to put up a common defense. Many times, it’s an external threat that causes people to adopt a peace system… Global warming is an example of a real, external threat. The classic example is, of course, the idea that Martians will invade and all of Earth will come together and defend ourselves against the Martians, creating global cooperation. No, the Martian is us, actually, manifested through various things like the pandemics and not being able to deal with them effectively; or pollution of our oceans, this lifeblood; species lost. We’re going to be in really bad shape if we have an equal ecosystem collapse regionally bit by bit, or more globally. These are all really, really serious threats. If we can only adjust our mentality a bit to redefine things to understand that, really, the only way forward for humanity is going to be to pull together and address these common threats to our species survival, or else the future is not looking good.

But one thing about the peace system model is it shows time and time again that across history, in different cultures and space, humans do realize the necessity of cooperating when faced with an external threat. So again, if we can just do a little bit of reframing the narrative, the external threat is not necessarily the Russians or whatever. No, it’s the conditions we’ve made and the conditions we face. So, we really have to pull together as a peace system.

**AMS:** Is there hope and potential, do you think, for global peace systems to become the more dominant model?

**DPF:** Yeah, of course, there is. You have to have some hope. In this case given our common, global threats, maybe we’ll develop a global peace system. I don’t know, but I hope so, or something similar to it. As we just talked about, I think it’s really necessary to have much greater international cooperation. We would solve so many problems if we could develop that expanded level of identification all the way up to humanity, all the way up to the planet level, and basically think about the Earth also, and all the creatures on it, as being part of the same bio life system. We need to get this, as in Buckminster Fuller’s book, [*Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*](https://www.amazon.com/Operating-Manual-Spaceship-Buckminster-Fuller/dp/3037781262). We’re all on the same spaceship, so we can’t be fouling our nest with pollution and so forth.It’s just foolish to be fighting among ourselves, or as the old saying goes, rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. We need to actually be steering the ship away from icebergs. There is hope.

Another way to approach this, and I’ve done this in some of my writings, is to understand just how flexible we humans really are and how huge changes really are the rule, not the exception. Things that people thought just never would change, have. If you’re talking about the fall of the Soviet Union into pieces, the breaking down of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany, in some way these are sort of child’s play compared to the larger magnitude of changes between our lives today and all of us running around as nomadic foragers for millennia upon millennia. Now here we find ourselves with mobile phones and everything else. The immensity of the changes that have occurred and can take place in the human future is huge.

As I see it, if you’re going to put forth the pessimistic view that we’ve always been this way and always will be, that we’ve always made war—well, first of all, that’s totally wrong. That’s just nearsightedness. And then if you follow that with a pessimistic view to the effect that this is just a mess we’re in and there’s nothing we can do about it, well, that’s wrong, too. People all the time have been making huge social movements and improvements. I also like to look at social improvements such as reducing the chance of war or successfully tackling climate change as two steps forward and one step back. You just have to maintain some optimism. Sometimes it’s two steps forward and four steps back. Okay. That’s a real bummer. Don’t get too depressed. Just work on going forward again.