

Building Political Structures with the Crooked Timber of Humanity

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1. In his book, *The Ants*, the Harvard entomologist and evolutionary theorist, E.O. Wilson, said that "Karl Marx was right, socialism works." He then added, "it is just that [Marx] had the wrong species." Wilson was talking about the evolved sociality of ants, which he was studying long before he turned his attention to human sociality in such books as *On Human Nature* and *Consilience*. Along with pioneers such as Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, Wilson can claim to be one of the founders of evolutionary psychology.

2. The scene of evolution that most concerns the development of the human personality is essentially the Pleistocene, the long period lasting from 1.6 million years ago up until the shift to the Holocene with the invention of agriculture and large settlements 10,000 years ago. Our present intellectual constitution was more-or-less achieved toward the end of this long period, by about 50,000 years ago. (Were you to see your ancestors from the start of the Pleistocene walking down George Street, you'd likely call the RSPCA, who would respond with nets and tranquilizer guns. This would be an animal that needed care in a zoo. But by the very end of the Pleistocene, 10,000 years ago, our ancestors are just us: at the worst, you'd only call the Border Patrol.

Keep in mind the immensity of this time scale: calculating at twenty years for a generation, there were 80,000 generations of humans and proto-humans in the Pleistocene, while there have been a mere 500 generations since agriculture and the first cities. It was in the earlier, much longer period that selective pressures created genetically modern humans. These pressures might have pushed only very slightly in one direction over another. But a slight pressure over tens of thousands of generations — toward a taste for sweet, say, or a wariness of snakes — can deeply engrave psychological traits into the mind of any species.

Pleistocene evolution is often associated with the savannahs of East Africa, but human evolution occurred in many places out of Africa — in Europe, Asia, and the Near East. It was going on in the Ice Ages and during interglacial periods. The wide-ranging, hunter-gather species we became did not evolve in a single habitat, but adapted itself to all sorts of

environmental extremes. Selective pressures would have been affected by climate, varying availability of foods, diseases, and predator threats.

But beyond survival in natural habitats, each of our ancestors also faced threats and opportunities posed by other human groups and individuals, We therefore had to evolve to accommodate ourselves to each other, both as individuals and as groups. It is all of these forces acting in concert that eventually produced the intensely social, robust, love-making, murderous, convivial, organizing, squabbling, friendly, upright walking, omnivorous, knowledge-seeking, arguing, clubby, raiding-party, language using, versatile species of primate we became: along the way to developing all of this, politics was born.

3. Speaking personally, the history of political theory has never especially attracted me because it has so often seemed to be a history of (a) disengaged political exhortations – essentially what the philosophical positivists said about ethics – vaguely based on (b) some kind of theory of human nature – where the idea of human nature was produced in an armchair or was found implicit in a theology the theorist happened to have grown up with. As it has often been practiced, social and political theory attempts to fit – I almost said shoehorn – the myriad forms of historically and culturally inflected human behaviors that constitute social life into some kind of rational system. In making this criticism, I do not claim to have found every full-blooded political theory wanting; it is rather that political theories seem so often to float in space like crystal spheres. Hey, that’s a nice idea, maybe, but where did it come from?

3. I’m speaking here is the history of philosophy. If we look at the more recent history of the social sciences – say, in the last century – we find related problems. A lot of what has gone down as theories of social or political life has turned out to be simply inventively re-description of the phenomena it purports to explain. Speaking of psychology, Steven Pinker has nicely brought out what we might call the “explanatory deficit” in the social sciences. He is talking about his early disappointment as a new postgrad student enrolled in psychology:

“Psychology seemed to lack any sense of *explanation*. Like the talk show guest on *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* whose theory of the brontosaurus was that ‘the brontosaurus is skinny at one end; much, much thicker in the middle; and skinny at the other end,’ psychologists were content to ‘explain’ a phenomenon by re-describing it. A student rarely enjoyed the flash of insight which

tapped deeper principles to show why something *had* to be the way it is, as opposed to some other way it could have been.”

And what is it that can give us the desired insight? What Pinker was looking for was some kind of *causal* explanation. Causes are real; causes explain. Causes are *reductionist*, but in an undeniably helpful sense: they cut out irrelevance and reduce processes and relationships to the factors that count. All the better, too, if the causes are linked to an intelligible system, one which makes classification and systemization possible.

5. A proper theory, however, does more than just identify a cause. It will place that cause, and other causes and effects, into an intelligible system. What makes Darwinian theory so powerful, for instance, or something like the Periodic Table of Elements or the germ theory of disease, is not just that it can tell you about a cause and effect relationship or two, but that it provides a large intelligible schema that makes sense of the big picture, to make predictions, track associations, and so forth.

Pinker has also nicely commented on the lack of an explanatory schema as again making for his disappointment in psychology as a discipline. He remarks that if you look at how psychology has been traditionally divided into sub-disciplines, for example in undergraduate courses or the chapter headings of Psych 101 textbooks, one finds an oddly unrelated series of topics: memory, emotion, intelligence, abnormal psych, learning, and so forth. Yet these topics seem to have no rational relationship to one another: they are not *functionally* related to each other, as for example the main topics of evolutionary theory are related to each other (think of genetics, population studies, survival, natural selection, sexual selection, island effects, mutation, etc. etc.).

Imagine a textbook for the systematic study of automobiles that had chapters on aluminum objects, things made out of red plastic, things made out of gray plastic, round things, things made of steel, large rubber objects, etc. What makes the idea laughable is that an automobile is a functionally integrated system: the parts – engine, drive train, axels, and so forth – function together to accomplish an overall purpose. Something like this ought to be able to be said of the human mind, whose evolved parts function for the survival, reproduction, and perhaps even the flourishing of individual and the species of which they are members.

6. However, having said all that, let’s remind ourselves that just as science proceeds on the presupposition that physical events have physical causes, even if we don’t know what they are, so social and political

philosophy has since Plato and Aristotle proceeded according to the presupposition that ultimately human social arrangements must form a rational system – or must somehow spring from an independently existing rational system. You see this in Kant and other modern thinkers right up to Rawls: the job of the philosopher is to reveal a rational system covering any domain. It's open to all sorts of intuitive objections: for example, Hegel's wise remark that he could help wondering why Kant's categories came down to such a neat twelve in number. Why aren't there thirteen of them or seventeen, he wondered? Why did we deserve to be so lucky – that it all turns out to be so neat?

6. It was Darwin, in fact, who really opened the floodgates of what we might describe as psychological contingency. If the evolved human mind is subject to all sorts of weird, fortuitous, and random historical flukes, if it's a kluge, as Gary Marcus puts it, then we shouldn't be looking for a rational system. Instead, we should take facts as they arise. But for Darwin, the whole human organism is something of a kluge.

(From the standpoint of anatomy and physiology, this is stressed by such writers as Richard Dawkins, who fond of pointing out such facts as the way the laryngeal nerve in mammals loops all the way around the dorsal aorta on its way from the larynx to the brain – needless and irrational, except that it has to be because that basic structure is inherited from our fish ancestors, and there is no way we, or evolution, can get around it.)

7. My commentator, Paul Rubin, has provided in his *Darwinian Politics* one of the best guides to evolutionary contingency as it applies to human psychology and thus to human political life and history. One of the most appealing aspects of Paul's work is that it delivers a characterization of human nature – human political nature – that acknowledges the haphazard essence of the subject as evolved. The system lies in the Darwinian processes that give us the outcomes – for us and other living things. These outcomes do not themselves, however, form a pretty system. Take one of my favorites: the implications of the size of the Pleistocene hunting band:

Hunter-gatherer bands in the Pleistocene were in the range of 25 to 150 individuals: men, women, and children. These small bands would have sometimes formed larger agglomerations of up to a few thousand for the purpose of mate-seeking and defense, but this would have been unusual. The typically small size for bands meant that interactions within the group were face-to-face, with everyone knowing the name and something of the reputation and character of everyone else. Though group members

would have engaged in some specialization of labor beyond the normal sex distinctions (men as hunters, women as gatherers), specialization would not have been strict: all men, for example, would haft adzes, make spears, find game, kill, and dress it, and hunt in bands of ten or fifteen individuals.

This group size for hunting parties remains a persistent unit of organization even in mass societies of millions of people. It is in fact the default “comfortable” size for human working groups. In military life, for example, modern mass armies may contain millions of soldiers organized in strict hierarchies, with companies and regiments, but the fundamental infantry fighting unit is still the squad: typically ten to fifteen men (or now women). In the U.S. Army version, the squad consists of a staff sergeant and corporal in command of ten privates. In its Pleistocene incarnation, such a hunting band was big enough to plan comprehensible strategies, numerous enough to surround game, diverse enough to exploit special talents of individuals (one man’s running speed, another’s game detection, another’s throwing accuracy), and powerful enough to overcome large animals with spears. It is also the default size for working groups such as company boards, university committees, and soccer, football, and baseball teams.

7. One of the inevitable outcomes of trying to systematize the social (and therefore moral and political) intuitions that arise from this ancestry is that we encounter clashes of intuitions. On the one hand, evolved psychology demands that we favor our close – or even fairly distant – blood relatives. This are natural-born nepotists. At the same time, we have a natural social sense that would also have evolved, that demands some degree is social fairness. Different modern social arrangements would accommodate this tension in different ways. Many people seem relaxed about with the notion that Queen Elizabeth’s children and grandchildren will one day be King, and that relaxed attitude extends toward putting up with political families even in democracies (think of the Kennedys or the Bush family). But in these latter cases, we do demand some kind of show of talent to earn a place in the democratic political sphere.

I’d add that these kinds of conflicts feature in clashes of aesthetic taste, the area where I do my primary work. For instance, it is a mark of philistinism in the contemporary world to walk through an art museum remarking on how much each painting or sculpture is worth. Such considerations, we imagine have nothing to do with aesthetics matters, which are at the heart of what is important about works of art.

I've come to believe, however, that in ways that can be traced back to prehistory, there is an inevitable association between art and wealth. That might mean market value, but even before there were art markets, the use of rare or precious materials was intrinsic to much art; art also involved techniques that were costly and time-consuming, and so forth. We are perfectly entitled to discourage our children to stop asking, "How much did it cost, daddy?" But also interesting is why children are inclined to ask that question so persistently about art – and not, say, about the food on their plates at dinner.

8. Such clashes have to be handled rationally. So rationality does come back in the picture – allowing us to adjust our stone-age proclivities – our prehistoric moral and political intuitions – to the modern world for which they are not necessarily designed. This means we can again throw down the welcome mat for political theorists. Not old-time theorists of the type who begin with abstractions and end with abstraction (which they've rearranged and made prettier), but theorists who begin with the empirical reality of human intuitions as they present themselves. What we want, what we need, and what we are going to have, is political theory informed by evolutionary psychology. The rational outcomes of such political theory will not be at the mercy of evolutionary factors; they will however, take evolutionary factors into account.

9. Kant's famous remark, "from the crooked timber of humanity no truly straight thing can be made," has not always been properly understood. I do not take Kant as making a cynical condemnation of human nature; he is rather noting that real life is played out in the space between what is rational and what is real.

It is therefore not, to extend Kant's metaphor, that no beautiful carving or piece of furniture can be produced from twisted wood; it is rather that whatever is finally created will only endure if it takes into account the grain, texture, natural joints, knotholes, strengths and weaknesses of the original material. Political utopians have treated human nature as indefinitely plastic, a kind of fiberboard building material for political theorists. Evolutionary psychology advises that political architects consider the intrinsic qualities of the wood before they build.

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