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COMMENTARIES

Of Emperors and Undergraduates

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It's a beautiful, warm summer afternoon; and I'm outside with a copy of Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's book *Mao: The Unknown Story* in my lap. I'm looking at Figure 46, which they've captioned "Mao's Bedroom," and given this description: "Mao liked to rule from bed, often summoning his colleagues from their own beds in the middle of the night. Chairs for his Politburo were set out at the foot of his huge book-strewn bed, on which he also romped with his numerous girlfriends."

Most of the written record—most of history—reads something like that. There is an exhibit in London this summer at the Hampton Court Palace Royal Chamber, where kings of England made *primi ministri in regis cubiculo*, or prime ministers of their royal bedchambers, out of their Grooms of the Stool—the emptiers of their chamberpots, who doubled as their pimps. Even better: More than a millennium before Henry VIII, a *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, or governor of the sacred bedchamber, ran the Roman Empire; and other eunuchs—or bedkeepers—managed the emperors' properties, bodyguards, and armies and looked after the emperors' slave harems. But those traditions are older, and longer, in China. Under the Ming emperors, after 1368, Beijing held an estimated 70,000 eunuchs, with another 30,000 scattered all over the empire, who herded thousands of women into imperial palaces, where they kept records of the pregnancies, pregnancy sicknesses, menstruations, and spontaneous abortions of the emperors' Forbidden City women (Betzig, 2014a).

H. sapiens is an adaptable species; and our reproductive variances reflect that, across time and space. In some societies—like our own society—egalitarianism and monogamy are the rule. But in other societies—like the vast majority of societies in the ethnographic, archaeological and historical records—greater political and reproductive skew prevail. Collectors of data in the modern West, both inside and outside of the United States, are likely to find weaker evidence of reproductive variance and its effects. But collectors of data on other contemporary societies—from Latin America, to North Africa, to parts of Asia including China—are

likely to find less reproductive egalitarianism, and a less egalitarian distribution of wealth. Ditto for collectors of data with more time depth. As history recedes into archaeology, and archaeology recedes into ethnography, there is less and less evidence of inequality—political, economic, or demographic. But the biases are greater than in modern North American cultures, in almost every case.

Over the vast majority of the 5,000- to 10,000-year period of history, there has been consistent, strong evidence of reproductive variance among men. In the first books of history, written into the Hebrew Bible, Solomon famously collected 1,000 women; and less famously, he had 88 or more grandchildren by his son and successor ("my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions"), Rehoboam. In Egypt, Rameses II, who was probably the Exodus pharaoh, was crowned in his father's harem ("he furnished me with a female household, a royal harem, identical to the beautiful women of the palace"), and left space in his huge Valley of the Kings tomb for some of his 49 *sons*. In India, Ashoka, the "Sorrowless" emperor, who covered his empire with Rock Edicts about right moral conduct ("kindness, generosity, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness increase among the people") won his throne over the bodies of 100 brothers. And in China, a Y-chromosome linkage, found in roughly 1 in 200 of *all* late-20th-century men, has been arguably passed down by the male descendants of Mongol emperor ("For he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise") Kublai Khan (Betzig, 2012, 2013; Zerjal, 2003).

Even before history, there was inequality. And some of it shows up in the archaeological record. As early as 100,000 years ago in southern Africa, and after around 50,000 years ago in the Mediterranean Basin, groups of *H sapiens* left behind grinding and pounding stones, storage facilities, hearths, graves, body ornaments, and Venus figurines—all signs of a more sedentary life. On rivers and tributaries across Asia, in more than 1,000 Upper Paleolithic sites bordered by the Ural Mountains to the east and the Carpathian Mountains to the west,

excavators have found houses of up to 20 square meters, with storage pits and hearths: Men, women, and children were buried with thousands of Arctic fox bone beads, bracelets, pins, or pendants (Bar-Yosef, 2002; Mellars, Boyle, Bar-Yosef, & Stringer, 2007). Fertility differences should have been the result.

Other evidence of inequality shows up in the ethnographies. The best demographic data on living hunter-gatherers—from the Aché of Paraguay, the Aka of the Central African Republic, the Hadza of Tanzania, to the !Kung of Botswana—were collected in disappearing habitats. These days, most foragers live on the margins, from the deserts of South Africa to the Canadian Arctic tundra; but in the Pleistocene, their environments would have been better. And foragers in better habitats—along coastal strips and inland waterways, where climates are consistent and resources are abundant year-round—tend to be more sedentary than other foragers (Keeley, 1988; Kelly, 1997). From the Pacific Rim in North America, to the Pacific Rim in Japan, foragers in consistently rich habitats are more likely to call themselves “big men” and to raise families by more than one woman (Betzig, 2014a, 2014b).

In short: For as long as 100,000 years—that is, for at least half as long as we’ve been worthy of the name *Homo sapiens*—the ethnographic, archaeological, and historical evidence suggests that we’ve been a species with a fair amount of reproductive variance. For most foragers, male reproductive variance tends to cluster in single digits. In semisedentary societies, it reaches double digits more often; and in the first empires, emperors consistently collected thousands of women and fathered hundreds of children, but many of their subjects—slaves and servants, celibates and eunuchs—had none (Betzig, 2012).

On the oasis of fairness that is the modern West, things are different. So it makes sense that students of those societies—psychologists, sociologists,

economists, and political scientists—tend to have a different perspective. They find that men and women in egalitarian cultures are likely to share mate choice preferences; and that they’re likely to have relationships with just one woman, or just one man, at a time. Most of us are less like Ashoka and other Mauryan emperors—who may have named themselves after the Sanskrit word for “Peacock.”

These days, we’re more gibbon-like.

Note

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