

But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?

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In the last chapter of his book, *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin wrote famously: “Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.”¹ Not many of us have taken him literally. People interested in Darwinian theory have tried to understand the roughly 200,000-year-old origins of *Homo sapiens*; but they’ve had very little to say about the roughly 5,000-year-old written record that is human history.

Nearly 40 years after his boat docked at Falmouth, Darwin did his best to explain the “low condition” of people he’d met aboard the *Beagle*. The trouble seemed to have something to do with their “nomadic habits, unfavorable to human progress,” he thought. “Whilst observing the barbarous inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, it struck me that the possession of some property, a fixed abode, and the union of many families under a chief were the indispensable requisitions for civilization. Such habits almost necessitate the cultivation of the ground.”²

Like most nineteenth-century British aristocrats, Darwin did not consider egalitarianism an asset. “The perfect equality among the individuals composing the Fuegian tribes, must for a long time retard their civilization,” he wrote.³ But he knew, as well as anybody, that inequality wasn’t always good for the weak—if beneficial to chiefs. He’d visited the natives in Australia, where “the women are the constant cause of war both between members of the same tribe and between distinct tribes.” And he had read about North American Indians, where “the contest is reduced to a system,” no weak man being permitted to keep a wife that a stronger man thought worth his notice. Besides,

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having been brought up on the classics, Darwin remembered his Horace: “*Nam fuit ante Helenam mulier teterrima belli causa*;” they’d gone to war for a girl in Troy. For *Homo sapiens*, as for any other species, the point of politics had always been sex—in an evolutionary sense. Winners became breeders; but losers did not. “This fact is so notorious it would be superfluous to give instances.”⁴

Only in the last half century have we started to use Darwin’s theory to solve Darwin’s problem: to understand why some animals are more “civilized” than others. As it turns out, most animals live alone, most of the time. More than 98% of all insect, bird and mammal species are solitary. But a few live in groups. And when they do, some animals—usually bigger, stronger animals—lay or fertilize most of the eggs; and other animals—usually smaller, weaker animals—do most of the work or help.

Some animals have been referred to as “cooperative breeders,” or *alloparental*. They live in societies ranging in size from a handful to hundreds of individuals; and most of those individuals are temporary, or “facultative,” nonbreeders. Roughly 220 species of birds, roughly 120 species of mammals, and a variety of other species are considered cooperative breeders.^{5, 6} So what turns hundreds of otherwise fertile individuals into helpers-at-the-nest? One answer seems to be: a hard-to-escape habitat. Cooperative breeders live on clumps of stunted oak along Florida’s old sand dunes; or on patches of lush Maldonado meadow grasses; or under the protective eaves of houses; or in the dense cover of shrubs and thickets. Where prey is abundant and predators are scarce, animals tend to get together in groups, where a handful

of dominants breed, and their subordinates are reproductively suppressed.^{7, 8, 9}

Other animals have been labeled *eusocial*, or “truly social.” They live in societies ranging in size from tens to millions of individuals, and the vast majority of those individuals are permanently, or “obligately,” sterile. All roughly 12,000 species of ant, all roughly 2,500 termite species, and a variety of bees, wasps, aphids, beetles and thrips—making up more than half the world’s insect biomass—at least one species of snapping shrimp, and two species of East African mole rat are all considered eusocial.^{10, 11} So what makes millions of individuals work as a sterile caste? One answer seems to be an even more discrete habitat. Eusocial species tend to colonize decaying logs; or live in the enclosed galls of *Acacia* leaves; or in the sponge cavities on coral reefs; or on 50 kilogram tubers randomly dispersed across arid ground. Eusocial societies build up on safe islands of superabundant food.^{12, 13}

For most of human history, the same seems to have been true. At the beginning and at the end of the human curve, societies have been relatively fair. For roughly 200,000 years before Darwin—for the roughly 200,000 years after we became *Homo sapiens*—most foragers raised their own broods. And over the last few hundred years, we’ve become more monogamous, again. But in between—across the ancient empires where history was first written, and over long the European Middle Ages—inequalities were large. Facultatively celibate monks, nuns, priests and abbots helped raise their promiscuous older brothers’ bastards for hundreds of years. And for millennia, obligately sterile workers ran governments, led armies, guarded harems, and looked after emperors’ children from China, to India, to the Near East, to Rome.^{14, 15, 16, 17}

Most ancient empires could be considered eusocial. On fertile river flood plains from North Africa to Asia—from Mesopotamia to the Nile Delta, from the Indus and Ganges to the Yellow River Valley, and around the Mediterranean Basin—a handful of emperors collected thousands of “virgin companions.”¹⁸ But, like eusocial insects, crustaceans or rodents, some of the subjected were conscripted into sterile castes. “Beardless” attendants were carved into alabaster vases 5,000 years ago at Uruk, and later worked—as generals, governors, bodyguards, and upper level civil servants—across the Ancient Near East. The impotent testicles of the desert god, Seth, were written into

Ancient Egyptian pyramid texts. “Third genders” were asked to look after the happiness of India’s Maurya and Gupta emperors from the fourth century BC. Castrated men swarmed like flies around flocks in spring in imperial Rome. And by AD 1644, when the last Ming emperor gave way to the first Qing, Beijing held an estimated 70,000 eunuchs, with another 30,000 scattered all over the empire: they filled four departments, eight bureaus, 24 directorates, and the *Dongchang*/Eastern Depot/secret police.

Other cultures could be considered cooperative breeders. For most of the millennium that was the Middle Ages—from around the time Constantine the Great moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople in 330, to around the time Constantinople got sacked by crusading armies in 1204—Europe was ruled over by landowners. They fed the swarms of women in their labyrinthine castles on wagonloads of beer and wine shipped from their estates every week, and on bushels of grain. Like other alloparental birds and mammals—other cooperative breeders—many of their daughters and younger sons became celibate helpers-at-the-nest. They were put away as *oblates*, or “gifts” to the Church.

Then Columbus sailed to the New World, and we became more democratic again. After he made landfall in the Bahamas in October of 1492, he found native Americans armed with bows, arrows, wood clubs, and fire hardened javelins no match for his Spaniards’ metal swords, crossbows, muzzle loaded guns, and small cannon. “They are all naked, and of no skill in arms, and so very cowardly that 1,000 would not stand against 3,” the admiral reported in his *Diary*. And, as he informed Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen of Spain, “I assure Your Highnesses that it seems to me that under the sun there can be no better lands.”¹⁹

Sir Walter Raleigh sent a reconnaissance ship across the Atlantic roughly a hundred years later, which found the Americas “plentifull, sweete, wholesome, and fruitfull;” and John Smith, who founded the first permanent American settlement, was impressed with its “pleasant plaine hills, and fertile valleyes, one prettily crossing another, and watered so conveniently with fresh brookes and springs.”²⁰ Over the course of the sixteenth century, close to a quarter of a million immigrants would come to the New World from Spain; in the seventeenth century, over half a million people would leave England, and by the end of the eighteenth

century, there would be over 4 million people in the United States—mostly of British descent.²¹ They'd started to occupy a new habitat: a second hemisphere; two nearly empty continents; the vast expanse of the American West.

The upshots were an end to eusociality and to alloparental care. A short generation after 1492, on All Hallow's Eve of 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 *Theses* to the door of a Wittenburg castle, and celibates—like Luther—started to get married. Then in January of 1649, the House of Commons ordered the execution of King Charles I as a “public enemy to the good people” of England; and in October of 1791, for attacking the “sovereignty of the people,” the French National Convention had King Louis XVI guillotined.^{22, 23} We the People had ratified a new Constitution by then, securing the blessings of liberty “to ourselves and our Posterity.” Suddenly, everybody had the opportunity to raise a family.

In the ratification debates printed in *The Federalist Papers* in 1787 in New York, the Father of the Constitution, James Madison had written: “But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?”²⁴ I think that Madison was right, and in a much more literal sense than any of the Founding Fathers, or even Darwin, could have guessed. *Homo sapiens*, like any other species, lives in despotic societies where individuals are ecologically constrained, and in egalitarian societies where they're free to leave. In most of the societies of history—on rich, protected habitats surrounded by mountains or deserts—lords and emperors fathered more than their share of children, with help from subordinate celibates and eunuchs. But on the wide open spaces of the Old World, for the roughly 200,000 years before history was written—and for roughly the last five centuries, on the broad empty expanse of the New World—most everybody was able to avoid overlords, and most everybody bred. At the beginning, and at the end, of human time, we've been politically and reproductively egalitarian.

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