

DARWIN, DISASTER, AND WAR:
COMMENTS ON PROSOCIALITY

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DISASTER POLITICS

Let's begin with the false "security" fears that delayed and militarized the US response to the Haitian earthquake (echoing the Katrina response [Protevi 2009]). Instead of rescue, relief, and security (in that temporal and priority order), the priorities of the last two were reversed and relief was delayed and subordinated to security.

There was plenty of media fear mongering in the aftermath of both Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. Anarchy in the streets, food riots, "looting," sexual predation (especially prevalent after Katrina, no doubt due to the presence of "tourists" – code for "white").

But these fears ignored the fact that the Haitian people had not "descended into anarchy" but had themselves already commenced their own rescue effort and needed supplies for relief, not "security." In the words of Gen. Russell Honoré, of the Katrina rescue effort, the people of Haiti, like those of New Orleans, "were their own first responders" (CNN 2010). What was needed was relief organizations (including the military, but in a mission prioritizing relief over security) catalyzing and organizing the already activated prosocial behaviors of the Haitians; there was little need to securitize the situation.

In fact there's very good sociological evidence from the University of Delaware Disaster Research Center (<http://www.udel.edu/DRC/>; see also the Local to Global group <http://www.local2global.info/> for case studies in Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe) that shows widespread prosocial behavior in the aftermath of disasters. The Delaware folks also criticize the role of media in spreading "disaster myths" which include the idea of widespread anti-social behavior; these myths feed into the securitization of rescue efforts (see Protevi 2009 for specific citations).

The basic political theory perspective is the following: far from showing a Hobbesian nightmare of atomized predation in the wake of the failure of the state, the overwhelming evidence of prosocial behavior in disasters shows the fragility of the atomization practice of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. It's not that the state is needed to keep a precarious

social contract together so that otherwise “naturally” atomic individuals will not prey upon each other; it’s that the state is needed to enforce policies that foreclose the prosocial behavior that would otherwise emerge (Ostrom 2005) and that does in fact emerge in disasters.

However, delays of a few critical days can produce incidents of antisocial behavior that are then, retrospectively, seen as justification for the initial “security” fears. (This is also seen in "kettling" maneuvers by police – or indeed just their showing up in riot gear – that produces the violence that it was supposed to prevent and thus retrospectively legitimates the kettling [Reicher et al 2007].)

Although the above is a good general framework, it needs some nuancing. Some media coverage of disasters emphasizes prosocial behavior, celebrating it as evidence of common humanity underneath “political” or “social” divisions (rarely thematized, it must be said, as “class” divisions). However, the Katrina coverage was notable for its credulity with regard to rumors (disproved within a month or so) of anti-social behavior that in retrospect were little more than shameful racial stereotypes of violent and sexually aggressive African-American males. So it often depends on whether the “right kind” of victims of disasters is being portrayed.

Let me say a few words about affective neuroscience treatments of fear and panic (Le Doux 1996; Panksepp 1999) and on mirror neurons and empathy (Gallese 2001; Heyes 2010). The admittedly speculative idea I’m proposing here is that fear and panic are individualizing while empathy is socializing. Although socializing empathy -- obviously needing correct child-rearing practices, and obviously with culturally different triggers and to some extent patterns -- is the default setting (which now needs disasters to reveal itself, given atomizing neoliberal practices) atomizing panic trumps empathy via an extra affective charge in certain specific and highly intense situations (such as fire in enclosed spaces). The extra affective charge of panic makes it more attention grabbing; in other words, we are evolutionarily primed to pay more attention to panic behavior in conspecifics than to socializing empathic behavior, as that is the norm or default setting. This extra affective charge is used by media to elicit attention to reports that emphasize if not invent panic and anti-social behavior in disasters.

EVOLUTION

Let us now turn to evolutionary theory to sketch the issues around altruism and group selection (Sober and Wilson 1998) as well as the debates specific to primate prosociality and its implications for understanding human prosocial behavior and its relation to morality (Joyce 2006; Hrdy 2009). We’ll specifically look at the questions about the role of war and group selection for altruistic or at least prosocial behavior and emotion. That will be the rest of the talk.

I should say here that I am a bio-cultural person: human nature has evolved so that our nurture becomes second nature. That is, we are "bodies politic" in which the social and somatic are intertwined via subjectification practices (which are not limited to childhood,

even if they are mostly intense there). I also use the term "political physiology." Some of the keywords here are neuroplasticity and epigenetics (Protevi 2009 and 2013).

This passage on altruism, group selection and warfare from Darwin's 1871 *The Descent of Man* is very widely quoted.

When two tribes of primeval man, living in the same country, came into competition, if (other things being equal) the one tribe included a great number of courageous, sympathetic and faithful members, who were always ready to warn each other of danger, to aid and defend each other, this tribe would succeed better and conquer the other (Darwin 2004 (1871), 113).

An interesting new book by Samuel Bowles and Hubert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species* (2011) posits widespread pre-State war as a necessary selection pressure for prosocial behavior, calculations, and emotions. Fry 2013b will challenge them. Let's review the issue.

VOCABULARY

1. Prosocial behavior: helping and hurting others according to social patterns. Prosocial doesn't mean "nice": it means an intellectual understanding of, and emotional investment in, social patterns, which can motivate and justify punishing violators as well as helping those in need.
2. Fitness = descendants living to reproductive age.
3. Altruism = helping behavior with a fitness cost (direct risk to life and limb, but also just time spent away from mate selection, child raising, resource provision, etc.). Self-sacrifice is a dramatic example, but it can be less than that. Further, prosocial and 3rd party punishment [punishing X for violating a norm affecting non-kin person Y] carries risks: you could start a feud; you eliminate a potential ally, ...
4. Next there are some ways of explaining helping behavior that appears to be altruistic, but has hidden benefits that balance out (or outweigh) the fitness costs.
 - a. Kin selection: costly helping behavior that helps genes in kin to survive ("I would sacrifice myself for two brothers or for 8 cousins.")
 - b. Reciprocal altruism: aid given back to donor by recipient with time delay ("I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine.")
 - c. Mutualism: working together so that immediate benefits (at end of successfully completed task) accrue to all parties compensating for any costs. ("Hey, let's all go hunting this woolly mammoth.")
 - d. Indirect altruism: aid given to donor by a third party (due to reputation gained by altruistic acts) ("Scratch an 'altruist,' watch a hypocrite bleed.")
5. Sexual selection (qua female mate preference instead of male arms race): altruism as predictor of genetic quality. "Costly signaling": "think how much energy I have if I can waste it like this."
6. Social selection (Boehm 2012): enforcing egalitarianism. Ridicule, exile, killing. Often it is the kin of the mad dog or simple bully prone to violence who step in to take him out, to prevent escalation. Origin of conscience as self-inhibitor of

temptations to non-sharing and active theft, bullying, killing, etc. ("You better think twice, because if you make a mistake the group is going to react harshly.")

PROSOCIAL UNDERSTANDING AND EMOTIONS

Empathy is an emotion that motivates prosocial behavior. It is the ability to care about other people, for the sake of those people.

We need to distinguish empathy from two other sorts of feeling: 1) emotional contagion (the way emotions can spread among people, especially infants); 2) and sympathy (feeling something that someone else does).

We also need to distinguish helping motivated by empathy (helping them for their sake, because they need help) from helping motivated by stress relief (helping someone to alleviate the bad feeling you have from their distress).

There are many other prosocial emotions besides empathy: righteous indignation (shading into outright anger), shame, guilt, joy and so on.

Although the prosocial emotions are important, we should not think that prosociality does not have an intellectual component. Many cases of social conflict are not clear-cut and require discussion and debate. Basically, I'm an affective-cognition person: all cognitive acts are emotionally shaped and inflected (pure affectless rationality can be socially crippling, as in Damasio's patient Elliot), while emotions have cognitive, reality shaping and disclosing, dimensions.

WAR

However, for Bowles and Gintis, all the above mechanisms are not enough for the evolution of prosocial behaviors, calculations, and emotions. War is also necessary for group selection for prosociality. (Recall that I want to have group selection target bio-social subjectification practices producing prosocial behaviors -- again, the keywords here are neuroplasticity and epigenetics -- rather than genes.)

Even if we take the body politic or political physiology position, we must still take into account a bitter controversy in anthropology about the alleged universality of warfare in human evolution and history.

There are three elements to consider here: the biological, the archaeological, and the ethnographic.

Regarding the biological, an important first step is to distinguish human war from chimpanzee male coalition and aggressive hierarchy, to which it is assimilated in the "humans as killer apes" hypothesis (Peterson and Wrangham 1997). Criticizing the killer apes hypothesis, several researchers point out that we are just as genetically related to bonobos, who are behaviorally very different from chimpanzees (Fry 2007; see also

Ferguson 2008). We should also point to the historical reluctance to engage, and the incompetence, of even highly trained soldier and police officers in one-on-one, close-range fighting (Grossman 1995; Collins 2008). If we were "killer apes" military and police training efforts would be toward control, when in fact the effort has to go to enabling (which has, to be sure, made great strides with training using live-fire realistic targets aiming at reflex and quick decision or "shoot / no-shoot" engagements [Protevi 2008].) We can of course extend this analysis of training to the living conditions, initiation rites, and other training procedures of gangs, guerrilla groups, and so on.

Regarding the archeological: Proponents of universal war often point to findings of crushed skulls and the like in the archaeological record (Keeley 1997). Critics reply that some of the claims of war-damaged skulls are more plausibly accounted for by animal attacks (Fry 2007, 43). The anti-universalists will also seek to demonstrate that the universalists have cherry-picked their evidence (see Ferguson 2013a and 2013b).

Finally, we must couple the archaeological record with the current ethnographic record. But to do that we must distinguish smaller and less internally differentiated forager bands from more internally complex hunter-gatherer tribes with chiefs.

While the critics of the universal war thesis admit that forager groups have individual-level murder and revenge killing and even group "executions" of murderous individuals ("social selection"), they deny that they have the "logic of social substitutability" which enables warfare as anonymous group-level conflict in which any member of the opposing group is fair game (Kelly 2000; Fry 2007). The critics of universal war also remind us of the need to look at current tribal warfare in the context of Western contact and subsequent territorial constriction and / or rivalry over trading rights (Ferguson 1995).

The anti-universalists make two claims with regard to the penchant of the universalists to cite the Yanomamo: 1) they criticize the use of the horticultural Yanomamo as indicative of pre-State forager societies, and 2) they deny that Yanomamo warriors really did have reproductive fitness advantages [Fry 2007, 135-139].

Although Fry (2013a, 9-10 and 15-20) has a number of criticisms of Bowles and Gintis 2011, it should be said that he – correctly – does not accuse them of upholding the "human nature = killer ape" line. Indeed, Bowles and Gintis insist that early bands had extensive trade, marriage, and generally peaceful non-conflict relations with other groups (e.g., big seasonal meetings of many bands) as well as allowing for climate disasters to be a major predictor of warfare (thus not some "aggression" thesis).

THE SPINOZA QUESTION

In *The Evolved Apprentice* (2012) Kim Sterelny claims there has been an over-estimation of difficulty of cheater detection in small groups. (Hence he is not a supporter of Machiavellian Intelligence theories alone; in fact, cheater detection is less demanding than coordinating cooperation [2012, 7-10].) The real issue is how does cooperation in complex tasks work? His answer, apprenticeship, is fascinating in its own right, but what I want to

concentrate on here is the way in which at the end of his book Sterelny poses the question of functionalism, or if you prefer, the Spinoza question: why do people go along with hierarchies when they are at the bottom – or at least not at the top?

Granted, then, that the supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for their salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honour, to spend their blood and their lives for the glorification of one man. (Spinoza 2002, 389-90 [TTP, Preface])

Sterelny points to Richerson and Boyd 2005: how do small group cooperation and emotional commitment allow hierarchies to function? (There is a lot here about the proximal motivations of soldiers: the "band of brothers" phenomenon.) Richerson and Boyd distinguish what they call the family emotions (nepotism) from the tribal emotions (groups or prosocial). So how do hierarchies work with people with group or "tribal" prosocial emotions?

Top-down control is generally exerted through a segmentary hierarchy that is adapted to preserve nearly egalitarian relationships at the face-to-face level...The trick is to construct a formal nested hierarchy of offices, using various mixtures of ascription and achievement to staff the offices.... Selfishness and nepotism [family emotions] ... degrade the effectiveness of social organizations. (232-33)

But as a Deleuze and Guattari (1977) fan, I don't think Richerson and Boyd give fascist / or even just plain old authoritarian emotional commitment enough credit here. People will also directly emotionally invest in hierarchies as such (vertically, if you will), not just horizontally to peer groups.

These investments of an unconscious nature can ensure the general submission to a dominant class by making cuts (*coupures*) and segregations pass over into a social field, insofar as it is effectively invested by desire and no longer by interests. A form of social production and reproduction, along with its economic and financial mechanisms, its political formations, and so on, can be desired as such, in whole or in part, independently of the interests of the desiring-subject. It was not by means of a metaphor, even a paternal metaphor, that Hitler was able to sexually arouse the fascists. It is not by means of a metaphor that a banking or stock-market transaction, a claim, a coupon, a credit, is able to arouse people who are not necessarily bankers. And what about the effects of money that grows, money that produces more money? There are socioeconomic "complexes" that are also veritable complexes of the unconscious, and that communicate a voluptuous wave from the top to the bottom of their hierarchy (the military-industrial complex). And ideology, Oedipus, and the phallus have nothing to do with this, because they depend on it rather than being its impetus. For it is a matter of flows, of stocks, of breaks in and fluctuations of flows; desire is present wherever something flows and runs, carrying along with it interested subjects—

but also drunken or slumbering subjects—toward lethal destinations. (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 103-104).

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