

## ROUSSEAU AND CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY

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Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all look to empirical accounts of human behavior from their own time, from history, and from travelers’ accounts of foreign lands – as opposed to natural law theory – to ground their theories of human nature. Thus, they are all naturalists of a sort; for them political philosophy must be constrained by the type of beings we are; for them there’s no use in creating a system of justice that could not be instantiated here on this earth with its inhabitants.

While Hobbes and Locke appeal to history and travel accounts to provide depth and breadth to the evidence for their notion of human nature, it’s remarkably static; the accounts they adduce go to show that humans are basically the same, with the observed variation being reasonable adaptation to circumstances. So, it’s not really Rousseau’s appeals to history and to far-off lands that set him apart from Hobbes and Locke; rather it’s his appeal to the qualitative shifts in the development of human nature that counts, and that marks his modernity.

We would now, since the famous phrase of Lévi-Strauss (1977) – “Rousseau, founder of the human sciences” – think of Rousseau at the intersection of anthropology and political philosophy.

In this paper, I would simply like to note 3 points where the *Discourse on Inequality* can be put in contact with contemporary anthropology. 1) Rousseau’s savage man and the anthropological thesis of “human self-domestication” in the transition into and within the genus Homo; 2) Rousseau’s “happiest and most lasting epoch” after the “first revolution” resulting in humans living in acephalic egalitarian nomadic forager bands and the anthropological debates about how to interpret contemporary foragers; 3) Rousseau’s account of the origin of cities, states, agriculture, and slavery and the current anthropological debates about the origin of war.

### SAVAGE MAN

We can interpret much of what Rousseau says about the “freedom,” “perfectibility,” “self-love” (*amour de soi-même*) and “pity,” of “savage man” as describing a hypothetical primate endowed with the potentials for human aptitudes that only begin to be fully actualized after the “first revolution,” which leads to the true sociability of humans in early forager bands. In a

very interesting essay, "Perfectible Apes in Decadent Culture," Robert Wokler (2012) looks to Rousseau's mentions of contemporary accounts of the behavior of orangutans. Hence Rousseau thought that those apes might actually be part of the human species; they might be examples of "savage man."

What Rousseau describes as human freedom from animal instincts would be seen in contemporary terminology as developmental neural and behavioral plasticity (Wexler 2006): with the exception of startle reflexes, patterns of defensive physiological reaction, and some strong tendencies to easily acquired fear of snakes and cliffs, humans are remarkably open to learning responses to even dangerous situations. While fast messages from sense organs activate defensive reactions, parallel cortical evaluations arrive very soon afterward and can provide a choice from a range of learned maneuvers (LeDoux 2016). It's that addition of cortical evaluation that frees us from what looks like the automated reactions of other animals. (The burgeoning fields of animal cognition studies show that many animals also have a range of reactions so that one is more or less "chosen" from a repertoire given their own evaluations of sensory stimuli, but we can at least rescue Rousseau by emphasizing the qualitatively greater human evaluative and choice capacities.)

Such plasticity is the condition for perfectibility, the capacity to develop a ratcheting effect of needs / passions / reason: new needs bring new desires which awaken reason to search for solutions which in turn become needs as our bodies and minds become "addicted" to those cultural mechanisms (Henrich 2016). In contemporary terms, we talk of niche-construction / obligatory scaffolding / cultural learning. A physiological example: our ability to cook meat means we have offloaded a good bit of our digestion, shortening our intestines, shrinking our canine teeth, and expanding the range of foods we can handle. Henrich 2016 demonstrates this point with stories of the failure of stranded European explorers unless they adopt native ways in food preparation.

Let's recall Rousseau's relation of self-love and pity in savage man. For Rousseau, as savage man has very few relations with other humans, the self-preservation of one rarely impinges on that of another. It was Hobbes' illegitimate importation of the need to assuage the socially developed passions of pride and security into the condition of savage man that led him astray. Being ignorant of such vices, and having few needs and passions, leads to the "goodness" / non-wickedness of savage man.

That's not to say that for Rousseau there were never occasions for conflict among men; it's here however that he invokes pity as another counter-point to Hobbes. We both look out for our survival and feel an immediate repugnance at the pain of another.

There are three aspects contemporary thinkers would distinguish in Rousseau's account of pity (Stueber 2017). The first would be "emotional contagion," in which emotions spread from one organism to another, as in the wave of panic sweeping through a crowd. The second would be empathy, or "commiseration," which is, as Rousseau notes, strengthened by identification. This would be when one feels what the other is feeling. Contemporary thought warns here of in-

group vs out-group effects, and the way in which acting to help a suffering person can involve self-care; you are acting in part to reduce the pain you feel. A third aspect is “sympathy,” which involves understanding the emotional state of another without necessarily feeling that state and being moved to help them for their own sakes. (For my part, pure “sympathy” is a limit case; it seems true to experience that empathy and sympathy are blended in concrete cases.)

The next thing we have to talk about here is that Rousseau’s model of “savage man,” the orangutans, are solitary, and what we now know of our evolution doesn’t indicate a transition from solitary living to social life, but a growth from the social lives of our last common ancestor to the split between the lineage that becomes Pan (now includes chimps and bonobos) and the lineage that becomes Homo (now represented by modern humans). Comparative work looks to reconstruct a LCA from behaviors appearing in all descendants, even those undergoing considerable change since the split (Gonzalez-Cabrera, forthcoming). As current Pan and Homo creatures are social, we can conclude the LCA was as well. But the type of sociality it exhibits is a matter of controversy.

Chimps have lots of inter-male aggression, hierarchy and male alliances, tolerated food scrounging, and opportunistic ambush killing of neighbors in border zones. Bonobos have female alliances suppressing male coalitions, little inter-male fighting, use of sex in various combinations for conflict-avoidance / resolution, and no border ambushes.

If the LCA was more chimp-like than bonobo-like, then evolutionary human emotional development (one example of the study of which is the “human self-domestication” thesis or HSD) is mostly about cortical anger / aggression control of emotions oriented to domination. But if there were significant bonobo traits we would have developed capacities for top-down anger control as well as capacities for bottom-up pacific emotions. When circumstances permit – here is the zone for political philosophy! -- humans are remarkably pacific and sharing. Is this because we have learned ways to suppress our dominance-enabling hair-trigger temper and violent reactive aggression? Or is it because we genuinely and positively have an emotional structure that provides pleasure in peace and sharing? Well, for most people most of the time it’s a little bit of both. It’s not impossible to find pure examples of bullies and saints (and current politics seems to reward bullies, who might be expressing a developmental switch in a norm of reaction model which produces a behavior set adapted to circumstances of violent uncertainty), but it’s relatively rare.

So, when they do take hold, is peace and sharing something we have to internalize as a result of learning that they pay off relative to the risk / reward calculation our environment presents? Or is it something that, given the appropriate environment, is nurtured from an already-internal seed? One interesting clue: Tomasello 2009 relates experiments in which child helping is not affected by the presence or absence of external reward. They don’t want to keep helping because of a cookie they would get; they want to play because helping is pleasurable.

## THE LONG HAPPY EPOCH

We now turn to the transition from Rousseau's hypothetical reconstruction of savage man in the primary state of nature – the super-abundant “forest” – to the discussion of human life in the “happiest and the most lasting epoch,” after the catastrophe-induced formation of “nascent society” but before the formation of states, agriculture, slavery, and war. As there never were solitary primates in our line, nor was there ever a time without the sort of ecological “accidents” Rousseau invokes as the cause of our coming together, what we see here is the opportunity to discuss human evolution, specifically, as befits a paper on Rousseau, the development of modern human emotional structures.

This emotional development occurred in a time of the transition to obligate collective foraging. A side note here is necessary: we cannot consider contemporary foragers to be “living fossils” as many of Rousseau's formulations seem to suggest. (While Rousseau never claims that contemporary non-state peoples are fully “savage man” in the sense of never having departed the “first state of nature,” he will does say that the Caribs “have deviated least from the state of Nature” [Rousseau 1997: *DI*, Part I, para 44, p. 156.]

However, while it might be possible to carefully consider ethnographies of their social life as part of a reconstruction of early human foragers, but we cannot make Rousseau's unqualified assumption that contemporary foragers are “closer” to early bands. A number of issues arise here: 1) it is increasingly difficult to find people who haven't had dealings with States and their agents, or to find people whose neighbors deal with them on the basis of their own dealings with States; 2) geographical circumscription by States will tend to push contemporary foragers to lands whose exploitation by States is more difficult than just letting the foragers occupy them for the time being, whether or not the foragers would prefer other territories; the contemporary necessity of food-production on the marginal lands to which they are confined might very well have led to significant changes in forager behavior relative to earlier, pre-State times; 3) in particular, State-led geographical circumscription might lead to two problems: a) the loss of group fission as a form of intra-group conflict-resolution, and b) the loss of group flight as a form of inter-group conflict-avoidance. The loss of these options might then have led to increased intra- and inter-group violence relative to pre-State peoples. No one proposes a time in which humans did not engage personal violence; what is disputed is the ease with which one extrapolates from contemporary data to pre-State times. (It is here that bitter debates around archeological findings spring up.)

All this is related to one of the most interesting new discussions in contemporary anthropology, the “human self-domestication” (HSD) thesis. For Hare (2017), the HSD “also led to enhanced cooperation in intergroup conflicts.” We have to nuance this claim, however, by delving into the various “economies of violence” that inform debates on the origin of war (Protevi 2015). Here the basic question is whether war is a universal human experience, or whether it only occurs in certain social circumstances. The key distinction, in my mind, is that proposed by Kelly 2000 and 2005 between vengeance as personal and war as anonymous. If you define war as anonymous intergroup violence, the case can be made that it only arises in segmented

societies, leaving unsegmented forager societies as those without war, and thus defeating the universal war thesis. (See Fry 2013b for a full treatment of the issue.)

To see what's going on here, note that a prime selection pressure for self-domestication in early humans is capital punishment (CP) in unsegmented foragers (Wrangham 2014; the success or failure of CP in reducing murder in state societies is not directly deducible from its use in early forager societies). There is an interesting dialectic here: the acephalic social structure of forager bands is produced by the CP killing of murderers qua would-be dominators, while that same structure produces the need for CP, as, without an alpha to impose conflict resolution, individual conflict can result in murder, and hence the need for CP (Boehm 2012). Forager CP is a paradigm case of “warm” proactive aggression (Wrangham 2014), but the targeted killers are those hot-heads exhibiting poor control of reactive aggression or those cold-blooded bullies whose instrumental aggression is used to dominate others. CP thus selects for the ability to carry out the controlled anger / proactive aggression complex that enables war: it is language-mediated, group-oriented, and premeditated, though sometimes achieved by taking advantage of spontaneous opportunity. This would tend to be one-on-one. Note that Kelly 2000 distinguishes single CP from ambush by multiple people. This is on the way to social substitutability and war, as it requires group vengeance duty. Once we couple group duty on the side of the victimized avengers to group liability on the side of the offenders, we have set up feud, a form of war as anonymous inter-group violence.

## THE SECOND REVOLUTION

Rousseau’s positing of a historical origin of warfare, tied to states, agriculture, and slavery brings us to debates about the evolution of altruism. Darwin posited war as a selection pressure, at the group level, for altruism in pre-state societies.

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).

If, however, one denies the existence of pre-state warfare, but instead places it – as does Rousseau – at the origin of agricultural states, then other means for the evolution of altruism must be proposed. Despite some of Hare’s (2017) formulations, I don’t think capital punishment is a form of war, even if it helps prepare for it; it is personal and intra-group as opposed to anonymous and inter-group.

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. Some definitions are needed here. Altruism is helping behavior with a fitness cost. This includes prosocial and third-party punishment as they carry risks: you could

start a feud; you eliminate a potential ally. 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: 1) kin selection: costly helping behavior that helps genes in kin to survive ("I would sacrifice myself for two brothers or for 8 cousins"); 2) reciprocal altruism: aid given back to donor by recipient with time delay ("I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine"); 3) mutualism: working together so that immediate benefits (at end of successfully completed task) accrue to all parties compensating for any costs; 4) indirect altruism: aid given to an altruist donor by a third party due to reputation gained by altruistic acts; 5) sexual selection (qua female mate preference instead of male arms race): altruist behavior as "costly signaling," hence as predictor of genetic quality.

However, for Bowles and Gintis 2011, all the above mechanisms are not enough for the evolution of prosocial behaviors, calculations, and emotions. For them, war is also necessary to group selection for prosociality. 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).

What complicates things for Bowles and Gintis is the bitter controversy in anthropology about the alleged universality of warfare in human evolution and history (Fry 2013b covers the basics from an anti-universalist perspective). 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 (see Ferguson 2014 for an argument that chimpanzee inter-group violence is due to human impact rather than being an adaptation). Since as we know bonobos and chimpanzees have different social structures and behavioral repertoires, researchers have triangulated human, chimpanzee, and bonobos (for an interesting attempt to show that the last common ancestor here was more bonobo-like than chimp-like, see Gonzalez-Cabrera, forthcoming).

For instance, Wrangham and Peterson 1996 point to female coalition-building in bonobo society as preventing inter-group violence by male-coalitions. But I think the focus on eco-social difference is not going to be male (chimpanzees and men) vs female (bonobos) but egalitarian foragers vs hierarchical horticulturalists / agriculturalists (bands vs chiefdoms and States). Wrangham and Peterson equivocate between "war" and "violence" (war is a very specific form of violence) and conflate "war" and "border raid" — which they in turn assimilate too quickly to chimpanzee coalitionary killing (Kelly 2005). They are right that we have to look to an eco-social multiplicity, but they overlook "techno" as one dimension, a key point of Kelly 2005 who evokes era of defensive advantage due to adoption of javelins (see also Sterelny 2014). In sum, Wrangham and Peterson are not sufficiently careful in examining the economies of violence in different forms of human social organization. Specifically, they don't investigate egalitarian

forager anti-war societies (whose anti-war practices include violence qua CP and peace-seeking festivals) because for them all stories of anti-war societies are myths, not ethnography.

So while Rousseau locates gruesome vengeance in the economy of violence of forager bands in “nascent society” – the beginnings of *amour propre* turn injury into insult (Rousseau 1997: *DI*, Part II, para 17, p. 166) – he doesn’t allow war until after states, and that’s the point of our discussion here.

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There are many other aspects of Rousseau’s thought that provide an opportunity to discuss contemporary anthropological findings, but in the interests of time the above will have to suffice.

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