Altruists at War

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A CO-OPERATIVE SPECIES: HUMAN RECIPROCITY AND ITS EVOLUTION

by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.

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“Of course, there is a banal level on which I drag myself reluctantly out of bed, knock off as early as I can, push my luck in terms of punctuality...”

—Rob Lucas, New Left Review 52, March – April 2010

Don’t miss a deadline and get cut off mid-sentence, book by July 13th for the next Magazine Rack feature (see page 30)
however many preconceptions they upset. The fundamental process of variation and selection doesn’t cease to operate when phenotypic behaviour is the acting-out of instructions transmitted culturally rather than genetically. Nor did Darwin suppose that it did, any more than Bowles and Gintis do. The question is whether natural and cultural selection are processes different from, while continuous with, one another, but how the two interact and to what extent. Human beings are as susceptible as they are to cultural influences only because natural selection has made them so. That doesn’t make it impossible to change the innate psychological mechanisms which differentiate us from other species. But only genetic engineering or brain surgery can do it.

The understandable reason is that Bowles and Gintis have very little to say about what has happened during the ten or more millennia since our ancestors ceased to live in hunting and foraging bands and formed the large, permanently sedentary, agriculturally and in due course industrially productive and increasingly urbanised communities within which there evolved the armies, navies, churches, banks, law courts, schools, bureaucracies, parliaments and other formal institutions which are the staples of the sociological agenda. The one occasion where they talk of “borrowing a page from sociological theory” turns out to be no more than a reminder of the truth that social norms depend on being identified and learned as such by the members of the groups whose norms they are. Durkheim is on their list of references, but not Marx or Weber. There is no discussion of class conflict, slavery, caste, dictatorship, kleptocracy or imperialism. The European nation-state is cited as a ‘successful institution’ which produces ‘many replicates’, which will raise more than one eyebrow among historical and comparative sociologists.

The past ten thousand years of human history have seen something different from the co-evolutionary processes of natural and cultural selection that led up to them. Increasingly large societies of unrelated individuals who are entirely unknown to one another are now held together not only by innate predispositions to co-operation, channelled by imitation and learning into different cultural forms, but also by social institutions that give small numbers of individuals power to control the behaviour of thousands and even millions of others by force. That power may be resisted, and the groups that resist it most successfully may be those whose members exemplify a willingness to subordinate their individual interests to those of their group and even risk their lives on its behalf, but now the problem of order: is being solved not by the motives and behaviours on which Bowles and Gintis place their emphasis but by the exercise by rulers of coercive sanctions of a kind that no member of a hunting and foraging band could even conceive of, let alone implement. Some rulers may themselves be altruists. But the historical record is full of others who are not and who, as the cynics never fail to point out, are at least as successful in holding their societies together as any who are.

The difference is not that our hunting and foraging ancestors were nicer than we are. No doubt some were nicer than others, then as now. But that’s not the point. The difference is that until a few thousand years ago, not even the most brutal, single-minded and uncaring self-seekers could exploit the most vulnerable members of their groups without provoking effective counter-coalitions. But the time came when they could and did. The competition between altruistic and selfish strategies went on as before, but in an environment which made it a game of a new and wholly unprecedented kind. Inter-group hostility continued to reinforce intra-group altruism. But the self-seekers could now dominate their fellows by force, or the threat of force, provided that they could appropriate the resources with which to reward their chosen friends, punish their chosen enemies, and organise and direct for their own self-regarding purposes the labour of fellow members of their society with whom they stood in the novel relationship of rulers to ruled. Strong reciprocity becomes a different thing when it involves informing against neighbours who are suspected by the police of reluctance to inform against those of their fellow citizens whom the rulers are persecuting as enemies of the state.

Having passed as lightly as they do over all that, Bowles and Gintis take a modestly sanguine view of the future of human cooperation. Disarmingly, they admit to having at first recoiled at the ‘unpleasant and surprising’ conclusion that war contributed to the spread of human altruism. But that doesn’t persuade them to fall in line with the cynics. Instead, they point to the ‘tolerant’ altruism, as they call it, which leads people in richer countries to support such causes as tax-funded aid to the people of poorer nations, and question whether the ‘parochial’ altruism which is so effective in holding human groups together has always to depend on the presence of enemies to go to war with. They don’t, however, produce the evidence with which to persuade the cynics that it doesn’t. Their concluding assertion that ‘social preferences such as a concern for the well-being of others and for fair procedures remain essential to sustaining society and enhancing the quality of life’ is one that nobody is likely to challenge. But it needs to pass Hamilton’s test. It’s not enough for Bowles and Gintis to claim that the state of the world they would like to see is a possible one. They have to show how it could come about and sustain itself; and that requires an argument no less complex, wide-ranging and well supported than their argument for how altruism came into the behaviour patterns of the human species in the first place.

It will, however, be a pity if prospective readers are put off the book because they will not find such an argument in it. (Neither, incidentally, should prospective readers who turn and run at the sight of an equation be put off: you don’t have to be able to do the maths yourself in order to follow the logic of the conclusions drawn from it.) However the problem of order is (or isn’t) addressed by the human societies of the next ten thousand years, the story that Bowles and Gintis tell makes it hard for the cynics to claim that its initial resolution had nothing whatever to do with authentically disinterested altruism.

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