

Section 12 – Redefining the Sacred

Human Nature

European and American historians and anthropologists, conditioned by the overt and innate violence of their own cultures, have for centuries been misinterpreting the nature of hunter-gatherer societies. The men have been described as warriors when, if they were, they only became so to defend the women and children against violently acquisitive cultures like our own.¹

Evolutionary Psychology proposes to discuss what the minds and behaviour of people who have been dead for tens of thousands of years were like, based on observations of the behaviours of other species. Professor Jerry Coyne, of the University of Chicago Department of Ecology and Evolution, who is an outspoken critic of pseudoscience, wrote of it:

‘The latest deadweight dragging [evolutionary biology] closer to phrenology is evolutionary psychology, or the science formerly known as sociobiology. If evolutionary biology is a soft science, then evolutionary psychology is its flabby underbelly.’²

Evolutionary Psychology sets out to support the patriarchal dogma that humans are naturally violent, competitive and warlike and that the only possible model for human society is one ruled by the biggest, most competitive and aggressive men. To do this, it has had to ignore the evidence from existing peaceful, hunter-gatherer societies, amongst much else.³

In 1986, the United Nations sponsored the International Year of Peace and as part of that, commissioned a study by a group of leading scientists. Their report, which became known as the Seville Statement, makes the following propositions:

1. It is scientifically incorrect to say that we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors.
2. It is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behaviour is genetically programmed into our human nature.

¹ The extent to which some will forsake academic and scientific principles in order to forge a career is illustrated by the case of anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, who wrote *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*. He wilfully provoked the phenomena which he then claimed to observe.

² Coyne, J.A. *The fairy tales of evolutionary psychology: Of vice and men*. *The New Republic*, 3 April, 2000, pp. 27-34, cited at <http://thelastbehaviorist.blogspot.fr/2012/12/debunking-evolutionary-psychology.html> Retrieved 27/07/2014.

³ An even-handed critique of the issues with this discipline has been written by Mike Samsa for the *Last Behaviourist* blog. <http://thelastbehaviorist.blogspot.fr>

3. It is scientifically incorrect to say that in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behaviour more than for other kinds of behaviour.
4. It is scientifically incorrect to say that humans have a 'violent brain'.
5. It is scientifically incorrect to say that war is caused by 'instinct' or any single motivation.⁴

The Statement concludes:

'We are not condemned to war and violence because of our biology...*War was invented.*' (Our italics.)⁵

These assertions have been repeatedly confirmed by more recent research which supports the proposition that people are naturally co-operative and peaceful.

In 2012, Robert Cieri, along with colleagues at Duke University in North Carolina, measured 1,400 ancient and modern skulls to determine the amount of testosterone they had been exposed to during development.⁶ He found that 50,000 years ago, just when modern humans were crossing the Red Sea to populate the planet, there was a marked reduction. His study suggests that living together and cooperating put a premium on agreeableness and lowered aggression. These traits would have been selected for in mating, and that, in turn, led to changed faces and more cultural exchange. Cieri said:

'Humans are uniquely able to communicate complex thoughts and cooperate even with strangers...research on fossilized Stone Age humans from Europe, Africa and the Near East suggests these traits are linked, developed around 50,000 years ago, and were a driving force behind the development of complex culture.

'Human fossils from after modern behaviour became common have more feminine faces, and differences between the younger and older fossils are similar to those between faces of people with higher and lower testosterone levels living today,'⁷

Higher testosterone levels are implicated in higher levels of violence in humans as well as chimps and bonobos. Cieri added:

'Reduced testosterone levels enabled increasingly social people to better learn from and cooperate with each other, allowing the acceleration of cultural and technological innovation that is the hallmark of modern human success.'

⁴ http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/texts/doc_seville.html

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Published in the August 2014 issue of the journal *Modern Anthropology*. Cieri is currently at the University of Utah.

⁷ http://unews.utah.edu/news_releases/did-lower-testosterone-help-civilize-humanity/ accessed 13/08/2014

Cieri's research may be a crucial in helping us to understand how human culture developed. It provides an explanation for the underlying cooperation among modern humans that led to the two-group social system we have explored, which in turn led to settlement, agriculture and civilisation. It fundamentally challenges, with evidence from actual humans, the patriarchal orthodoxy of Evolutionary Psychology.

Human numbers were reduced to perhaps only a few thousand after Toba, and recovery was very slow. The survivors were one related population, which then spread out, not only across Africa, but also, through the Gates of Grief, across the whole planet. We, the modern human descendants of those low-testosterone ancestors, are innately cooperative, mutually supportive, and friendly; we are altruistic and artistic. These things are not functions of civilisation, religion or law; they are just how we are. Being friendly and cooperative was the key to our success.

Anthropologist Robert Sapolsky has been studying baboons in Africa for over thirty years. The group he was researching showed typical baboon behaviour. It was dominated by violent, aggressive, competitive males, who bullied all the other males, denying them access to females and often injuring them. They also violently raped both males and females. Stress levels and routine violence were high. Then, the troop discovered a cache of raw beef that had been dumped in a pit on their territory by a nearby safari lodge. The meat was contaminated with bovine tuberculosis, which is invariably fatal in baboons. Because the aggressive males had eaten it, having prevented the others from doing so, they all died and left a reduced population of non-aggressive males and females. Astonishingly, the males did not fight amongst each other for dominance but remained friendly and cooperative. When a wandering aggressive male appeared and attempted to take control, the gentle males teamed up and killed him – and then went back to peaceful grooming. Ten years after the meat incident, Sapolsky's group was still friendly and peaceful. Social systems that favoured violence and competition had been removed and new ones that favoured cooperation and peacefulness learned. The baboons in this group live longer and show little stress.⁸

Cieri's work demonstrates that even if our earlier human ancestors were violent and aggressive, the group we are descended from, the survivors of Toba, were not. Instead, they were likeable and co-operative. It is probable that this key advantage ensured our survival when other human species died out. We didn't 'kill them off'. We just knew how to get along better, and that made us stronger.

Sapolsky's findings are damning for those who condemn us as irretrievable monsters whose violent urges can only be contained by more violence or the threat of it. No-one would pretend that baboons are nice. They are not. Most baboon societies are ridden with aggression,

⁸ Sapolsky, R M. and Share L J. *A Pacific Culture among Wild Baboons: Its Emergence and Transmission PLOS Biology*. April 2004. <http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.0020106> Retrieved 14/11/2014.

violence and stress. But Sapolsky shows that even baboons can learn not to be that way. They can learn to get along. So could we.