

# HARMON, CHRIS. A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE WORLD. BROOKLYN, 2008.

## Prologue

\* BELIEVE YOU READ, CONSIDER WHAT YOU BELIEVE HUMAN NATURE TO BE. <sup>SELFISH</sup> <sup>AGE WE AS A SPECIES BASICALLY GREEDY & CRUEL</sup> <sup>IS THIS A FAIR DESCRIPTION?</sup>

NOTE: 1) 2) etc. = big timeline dates

DEFINE "CLASS". Before class

## Chronology

4 million years ago  
First apes to walk on two legs—*Australopithecus*.

1.5 million to 0.5 million years ago  
Clearly human species, *Homo erectus*, tools of stone, wood and bone. Early 'old Stone Age'.

400,000 to 30,000 years ago  
Neanderthal humans in Europe and Middle East—signs of culture and probable use of language.

150,000 years ago  
First 'modern humans' (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), probably originated in Africa. Live by foraging (in small nomadic groups without classes, states or sexual oppression). Middle 'old Stone Age'.

80,000 to 14,000 years ago  
Modern humans arrive Middle East (80,000 years ago); cross to Australia (40,000 years ago); arrive Europe (30,000 years ago); establish Americas (14,000 years ago). Late 'old Stone Age'.

13,000 years ago  
Climate allows some humans to settle in villages a couple of hundred strong while continuing to live by foraging. 'Middle Stone Age' ('Mesolithic').

10,000 years ago  
First agricultural revolution. Domestication of plants and animals. Neolithic ('new Stone Age'). More advanced tools, use of pottery. Spread of village-living. First systematic war between groups. Still no division into classes or states.

7,000 years ago  
Plough begins to be used in Eurasia and Africa. Agriculture reaches NW Europe. 'Chieftainships' among some groups, but no classes or states.

6,000 to 5,000 years ago  
'Urban revolution' in river valleys of Middle East and Nile Valley, some use of copper.

5,000 years ago (3000 BC)  
States emerge in Mesopotamia and 'Old Kingdom' Egypt. First alphabets, bronze discovered, clear division into social classes, religious hierarchies and temples. First pyramids in about

2,800 BC. 'Bronze Age': Tendency for women to be seen as inferior to men.

4,500 to 4,000 years ago (2500 to 2000 BC)  
Growth of city states in Indus Valley. Sargon establishes first empire to unite Middle East. Building of stone rings in western Europe. Probably Nubian civilisation south of Egypt.

4,000 years ago (around 2000 BC)  
'Dark Age'—collapse of Mesopotamian Empire and of Egyptian 'Old Kingdom'. Iron smelted in Asia Minor.

4,000 to 3,600 years ago (2000 to 1600 BC)  
Rise of 'Minoan' civilisation in Crete. Revival of Egypt with 'Middle Kingdom' and of Mesopotamian Empire under Hammurabi. Urban revolution takes off in northern China. Mycenaean civilisation in Greece.

3,600 years ago (1600 BC)  
Crisis in Egypt with collapse of 'Middle Kingdom' into 'second intermediate period'. 'Dark Age' with collapse of Cretean, Indus and then Mycenaean, civilisations. Disappearance of literacy in these areas. 'Bronze Age' in northern China with Shang Empire.

3,000 years ago (1000 BC)  
Uxum civilisation in Ethiopia. Growth of Phoenician city states around Mediterranean. 'Urban revolution' in 'Meso-America' with Olmec culture and in Andean region with Chavin.

2,800 to 2,500 years ago (800 to 500 BC)  
New civilisations arise in India, Greece and Italy. Merce in Nubia.

2,500 to 2,000 years ago (400 to 1 BC)  
Olmec civilisation of Meso-America invents its own form of writing.

2,000 years ago (1st century AD)  
Rise of Teotihuacan in Valley of Mexico—probably biggest city in world—despite having no use of hard metals. Deserted after about 400 years. Followed by rise of civilisations of Monte Alban and of Mayas in southern Mexico and Guatemala.

The world as we enter the 21st century is one of greed, of gross inequalities between rich and poor, of racist and national chauvinist prejudice, of barbarous practices and horrific wars. It is very easy to believe that this is what things have always been like and that, therefore, they can be no different. Such a message is put across by innumerable writers and philosophers, politicians and sociologists, journalists and psychologists. They portray hierarchy, deference, greed and brutality as 'natural' features of human behaviour. Indeed, there are some who would see these as a feature throughout the animal kingdom, a 'sociobiological' imperative imposed by the alleged 'laws' of genetics. There are innumerable popular, supposedly 'scientific' paperbacks which propagate such a view—with talk of humans as 'the naked ape' (Desmond Morris),<sup>2</sup> the 'killer imperative' (Robert Ardrey),<sup>3</sup> and, in a more sophisticated form, as programmed by the 'selfish gene' (Richard Dawkins).<sup>4</sup>

LEVELS IN SOCIETY

CAN YOU THINK OF WHAT FIELDS OF STUDY THIS WOULD INCLUDE?

Yet such Flintstones caricatures of human behaviour are simply not borne out by what we now know about the lives our ancestors lived in the innumerable generations before recorded history. A cumulation of scientific evidence shows that their societies were not characterised by competition, inequality and oppression. These things are, rather, the product of history, and of rather recent history. The evidence comes from archaeological findings about patterns of human behaviour worldwide until only about 5,000 years ago, and from anthropological studies of societies in different parts of the world which remained organised along similar lines until the 19th and earlier part of the 20th century.

The anthropologist Richard Lee has summarised the findings: <sup>WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP HERE?</sup>

Before the rise of the state and the entrenchment of social inequality, people lived for millennia in small-scale kin-based social groups, in which the core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalised reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations.<sup>5</sup>

DEF BELIEF

SOCIAL / POLITICAL EQUALITY

In other words, people shared with and helped each other, with no rulers and no ruled, no rich and no poor. Lee echoes the phrase used by Frederick Engels in the 1880s to describe this state of affairs, 'primitive communism'. The point is of enormous importance. Our species (modern humans, or *Homo sapiens sapiens*) is over 100,000 years old. For 95 per cent of this time it has not been characterised at all by many of the forms of behaviour ascribed to 'human nature' today. There is nothing built into our biology that makes present day societies the way they are. Our predicament as we face a new millennium cannot be blamed on it.

THE ORIGINAL COMMUNIST THEORIST (W. L. BRADY)

The origins of our species go much further back into the mists of time than 100,000 years. Our distant ancestors evolved out of a species of ape which lived some four or five million years ago in parts of Africa. For some unknown reason members of this species gave up living in trees, as do our closest animal relatives, the common chimpanzee and the bonobo (often called the 'pygmy chimpanzee'), and took to walking upright. They were able to survive in their new territory by cooperating more than any other species of mammal, working together to make rudimentary tools (as chimps sometimes do) to dig up roots, reach high berries, gather grubs and insects, kill small animals and frighten off predators. The premium was on cooperation with each other, not competition against one another. Those who could not learn to adopt such forms of cooperative labour, and the new patterns of mental behaviour that went with them, died out. Those who could survive and reproduced.

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Over millions of years this resulted in the evolution of a mammal whose genetic inheritance was very different to that of other mammals. It lacked the highly specialised physical features which enable other mammals to defend themselves (large teeth or claws), to keep warm (thick fur) or to flee (long legs). Instead, early humans were genetically programmed for extreme flexibility in response to the world around them—by being able to use their hands to hold and shape objects, being able to use their voices to communicate with each other, being able to investigate, study and generalise about the world around them, and being able, through long years of child rearing, to pass on their skills and learning. All this required the growth of large brains and the ability and desire to socialise. It also led to the development of a means of communicating with each other (language) qualitatively different to that of any other animals, and with it the ability to conceptualise about things which were not immediately present—that is, to become

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conscious of the world around them and of themselves as beings within it. The emergence of modern humans, probably in Africa some 150,000 years ago, was the culmination of this process.

Over the next 90,000 years groups of our ancestors slowly spread out from Africa to establish themselves in other parts of the globe, displacing other human species like the Neanderthals in the process. By at least 60,000 years ago they had reached the Middle East. By 40,000 years ago they had made their way to western Europe and also some-how managed to cross the band of sea separating the islands of south-east Asia from Australia. By 12,000 years ago, at the latest, they had crossed the frozen Bering Straits to reach the Americas, and were scattered across every continent except Antarctica. The small groups which established themselves in each location were often almost completely isolated from each other for many thousands of years (melting ice made the Bering Straits impassable and raised the sea level to make the passage from south-east Asia to Australia difficult). Their languages grew to be very different and each accumulated its own set of knowledge and developed distinctive forms of social organisation and culture. Certain minor hereditary characteristics became more marked among some than others (eye colour, hairiness, skin pigmentation and so on). But the genetic inheritance of the different groups remained extremely similar. Variations within each group were always greater than variations between them. All of them were equally capable of learning each other's language, and all had the same spread of intellectual aptitudes. The human species was separated into widely dispersed groupings. But it remained a single species. How each grouping developed depended not on anything specific about its genetic make up, but on how it adapted its manipulative skills and forms of cooperation to the needs of making a livelihood in its particular environment. It was the form taken by this adaptation which undelay the different societies which emerged, each with its own distinct customs, attitudes, myths and rituals.

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The different societies shared certain common, fundamental features until about 10,000 years ago. This was because they all obtained their food, shelter and clothing in roughly the same way, through 'foraging'—that is, through getting hold of natural produce (fruit and nuts, roots, wild animals, fish and shellfish) and processing them for use. These societies were all what are normally called 'hunting and gathering'—or, better, 'foraging'—societies.

WE HAVE BEEN HUNTER-GATHERERS FOR 140,000 YEARS  
 OUT OF 150,000 YEARS OF OUR EXISTENCE AS SPECIES

\* FUN TO THINK THAT MODERN HUMANS CO-EXISTED WITH ANOTHER RACE OF HUMAN-LIKE SPECIES  
 THERE IS EVIDENCE OF INTERBREEDING (... NOT MAZ. GATHERERS)  
 CULTURALLY ETHNIC RACIAL DIFFERENCES  
 INVENTION OF AGRICULTURE

3

Many survived in wide regions of the world until only a few hundred years ago, and the remnants of a few still exist at the time of writing. It has been by studying these that anthropologists such as Richard Lee have been able to draw conclusions about what life was like for the whole of our species for at least 90 percent of its history.

The reality was very different to the traditional Western image of such people as uncultured 'savages',<sup>10</sup> living hard and miserable lives in 'a state of nature', with a bitter and bloody struggle to wrest a livelihood matched by a 'war of all against all', which made life 'nasty, brutish and short'.<sup>11</sup> People lived in loose-knit groups of 30 or 40 which might periodically get together with other groups in bigger gatherings of up to 200. But life in such 'band societies' was certainly no harder than for many millions of people living in more 'civilised' agricultural or industrial societies. One eminent anthropologist has even called them 'the original affluent society'.<sup>12</sup>

There were no rulers, bosses or class divisions in these societies. As Turnbull wrote of the Mbuti pygmies of Congo, 'There were no chiefs, no formal councils. In each aspect of... life there might be one or two men or women who were more prominent than others, but usually for good practical reasons... The maintenance of law was a cooperative affair'.<sup>13</sup> People cooperated with each other to procure the means of livelihood without either bowing before a great leader or engaging in endless strife with each other. Ernestine Friedl reported from her studies, 'Men and women alike are free to decide how they will spend each day: whether to go hunting or gathering, and with whom'.<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Leacock told of her findings: 'There was no... private land ownership and no specialisation of labour beyond that of sex... People made decisions about the activities for which they were responsible. Consensus was reached within whatever group would be carrying out a collective activity'.<sup>15</sup> Behaviour was characterised by generosity rather than selfishness, and individuals helped each other, offering food they had obtained to other band members before taking it themselves. Lee comments, 'Food is never consumed alone by a family: it is always shared out among members of a living group or band... This principle of generalised reciprocity has been reported of hunter-gatherers in every continent and in every kind of environment'.<sup>16</sup> He further reports that the group he studied, the !Kung<sup>17</sup> people of the Kalahari (the so called 'Bushmen'), 'are a fiercely egalitarian people, and they have evolved a series of important

WHY DOES IT MATTER HOW WE DEFINE HUMAN NATURE?

Social Scientists Study Human Culture

FROM A 17TH C. ATILLOS PAPER NAMED THOMAS HOBBS

cultural practices to maintain this equality, first by cutting down to size the arrogant and boastful, and second by helping those down on their luck to get back in the game'.<sup>18</sup> An early Jesuit missionary noted of another hunter-gathering people, the Montagnais of Canada, 'The two tyrants who provide hell and torture for many of our Europeans do not reign in their great forests—I mean ambition and avarice...not one of them has given himself to the devil to acquire wealth'.<sup>19</sup> There was very little in the way of warfare, as Friedl notes:

Contests for territory between the men of neighbouring foraging groups are not unknown... But on the whole, the amount of energy men devote to training for fighting or time spent on war expeditions among hunter-gatherers is not great... Conflicts within bands are normally settled by the departure of one of the parties to the dispute.<sup>20</sup>

Such evidence completely refutes claims by people such as Ardrey that the whole prehistory of humanity, from the time of *Australopithecus*—the first ape-like animal to walk on two legs—through to the emergence of literacy, was based on the 'killing imperative', that 'hunter-gatherer bands fought over water holes which tended all too often to vanish under the baking African sun', that we are all 'Cain's children', that 'human history has turned on the development of superior weapons...for genetic necessity', and that, therefore, only a thin veneer of 'civilisation' conceals an instinctive 'delight in massacre, slavery, castration and cannibalism'.<sup>21</sup>

This is of immense importance for any arguments about 'human nature'. For, if such a nature exists, it was moulded by natural selection during the long epoch of hunting and gathering. Richard Lee is quite right to insist:

It is the long experience of egalitarian sharing that has moulded our past. Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, and despite the rather dismal track record of human rights in many parts of the world, there are signs that humankind retains a deep-rooted sense of egalitarianism, a deep-rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, a deep-rooted...sense of community.<sup>22</sup>

From a very different perspective, Friedrich von Hayek, the favourite economist of Margaret Thatcher, complained that humans have

Q CAN YOU THINK OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN, IF IT IS TRUE?

THIS REVEALS ABOUT BEING HUMAN? Q WHAT DOES THIS REVEAL ABOUT BEING HUMAN?

'long-submerged innate instincts' and 'primordial emotions' based on 'sentiments that were good for the small band', leading them to want 'to do good to known people'.<sup>23</sup>

'Human nature' is, in fact, very flexible. In present day society it enables some people, at least, to indulge in the greed and competitiveness that Hayek enthused over. It has also permitted, in class societies, the most horrific barbarities—torture, mass rape, burning alive, wanton slaughter. Behaviour was very different among foraging peoples because the requirements of obtaining a livelihood necessitated egalitarianism and altruism.

Hunters and gatherers were necessarily intensely dependent on one another. The gatherers usually supplied the most reliable source of food, and the hunters that which was most valued. So those who specialised in hunting depended for their daily survival on the generosity of those who gathered, while those who specialised in gathering—and those who were temporarily unsuccessful in the hunt—relied for valued additions to their diet on those who managed to kill animals. The hunt itself did not usually consist of an individual male hero going off to make a kill, but comprised a group of men (sometimes with the auxiliary assistance of women and children) working together to chase and trap a prey. At every point, the premium was on cooperation and collective values. Without them, no band of foragers could have survived for more than a few days.

Linked to this was the absence of male supremacy over women. There was almost always a *division of labour* between the sexes, with the men doing most of the hunting and the women most of the gathering. This was because a woman who was pregnant or breastfeeding a child could only take part in the hunt by exposing it to dangers, and thus threatening the reproduction of the band. But this division did not amount to male dominance as we know it. Both women and men would take part in making key decisions, such as when to move camp or whether to leave one band and join another. The conjugal unit itself was loosely structured. Spouses could separate without suddenly jeopardising their own livelihood or that of their children. Missing was the male supremacism which is too often assumed to be part of 'human nature'.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, there could not have been the obsession with private property that we take for granted today. The normal size of foraging bands was always restricted by the need to find enough food each day in the area of the camp. Within that area, the individual members

THIS IS WHAT WE MEAN BY BAND SOCIETIES  
RELATIONSHIPS  
GENERIC  
HUNT & GATHERING

WHAT WERE BAND SOCIETIES  
INTERESTING TO  
NOTE THAT OUR  
CONCEPT OF FAMILY  
IS A CULTURAL

were continually moving from one source of plant food to another, or in pursuit of animals, while the band as a whole had to move on every so often as the food supplies in a locality were used up. Such continual movement precluded any accumulation of wealth by any band member, since everything had to be carried easily. At most an individual may have had a spear or bow and arrow, a carrying bag or a few trinkets. There would be no concept of the accumulation of personal wealth. The material conditions in which human beings lived conspired to produce very different societies and very different dominant ideas to those taken for granted today.

The history of humanity over the last few thousand years is, above all, the history of how such very different societies and sets of ideas developed. That history is woven out of the actions of innumerable men and women, each attempting to make decent lives for themselves, their companions and their loved ones, sometimes accepting the world as it is, sometimes desperate to change it, often failing, sometimes succeeding. Yet through these interminable, interlinking stories two things stand out. On the one hand, there is the cumulative increase in humanity's ability to extract a livelihood from nature, the overcoming of the primitive material conditions which were part of 'primitive communism'. On the other, there is the rise of successive forms of organisation of society that oppress and exploit the majority of people to the benefit of a small, privileged minority.

If we trace these parallel sets of changes we will be able to see, eventually, how the world we face at the beginning of the 21st century arose. It is a world in which wealth can be produced on a scale undreamt of even by our grandparents, yet also a world in which the structures of class rule, oppression, and violence can seem as firmly entrenched as ever. A billion people live in desperate poverty, billions more are plagued by insecurity, wars and civil wars are endemic, and the very bases of human life are at risk from uncontrolled technological change. The dominating question for everybody ought to be whether it is possible to use the wealth to satisfy basic human needs by getting rid of the oppressive structures, to subordinate it to a society based upon the values that characterised the lives of our ancestors for the hundreds of generations of primitive communism.

But first, we have to look at how class rule and the state came into being.

IN THESE SOCIETIES CONCEPTS OF WEALTH BETWEEN RESPECTIVE BANDS

YOU CAN IDENTIFY EXAMPLES OF THIS?

WHAT IS THIS AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW?