



## Human beings are chronically conflicted animals. The evolution of egalitarian behaviour.

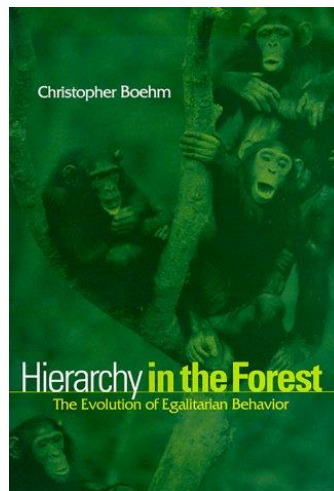
Reading time 13 minutes

A few months ago I read a long newsletter by the psychologist Rob Henderson that touched me deeply. Anthropology is not normally my hobby. But the parallels to today's political discussions motivated me to share the main points with the tribe of BrainCandy readers. I condense strongly. Check out the [linked](#) article if you are interested in more examples.

"Our ancestors were polygynous until about three hundred thousand years ago, predominantly monogamous until about ten thousand years ago, predominantly polygynous again until about two thousand years ago, and predominantly monogamous since then." This is a quote from the book *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* by Nicholas Christakis.

Homo sapiens emerged about 300,000 years ago. Of these 300,000 years, humans were found in a predominantly polygamous form for only about 8,000 years. So for 97% of our history, humans were mainly monogamous.

Many people have images of kings, emperors and pharaohs with many wives and concubines. But this period was only a brief moment in evolutionary history. What did humans look like before that time - before the advent of agriculture? *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behaviour* by anthropologist Christopher Boehm is the most important book on hunter-gatherers.



Picture credits: Amazon

### Equality of status among hunters and gatherers

In the book, Boehm uses a variety of modern hunter-gatherer communities to explore the question: Are humans hierarchical or egalitarian by nature?

Anthropological research on modern hunter-gatherers suggests that we have been egalitarian for most of human history. In hunter-gatherer groups, it is true that sometimes a self-confident alpha type appears who tries to exert dominance over the rest of the community. The weak then band together. And end the issue. This model has worked as long as humans have been nomadic hunter-gatherers. That is most of human history.



People who were constantly on the move could not accumulate resources or mobilise large armies to dominate others. Before the agricultural revolution ten to twelve thousand years ago, groups and tribes lived egalitarian lives, meaning their members had roughly equal status. Although these communities sometimes had informal leaders, they usually relied on group consensus to get things done. If someone tried to make a decision without consensus, he was often killed by the others.

### **Self-domestication through murder conspiracies**

This is the hypothesis of self-domestication discussed by Harvard anthropologist Richard Wrangham in his book *The Goodness Paradox*. In hunter-gatherer communities, when aggressive or disagreeable men tried to exert dominance, other men conspired to kill them. Early human communities selected against aggression and monopolising food and females. Other men conspired silently to kill troublesome men together. This form of capital punishment has domesticated us.

Wrangham compared the extent of group conflict in hunter-gatherers with that of chimpanzees. Chimpanzees are 150 to 550 times more likely to engage in violence against their peers than humans. Thanks to our ability to plan organised killings, humans are much gentler with members of their own community than chimpanzees. Usually, both sexes have a say in deciding whether a person was socially deviant. Executions were usually carried out by men.

Within the groups, adult men tended to treat each other as equals, while women and children were treated as subordinates.

### **Fear of negative social judgement**

Generosity is an enforced moral norm in hunter-gatherer societies. The community promotes altruism and condemns stinginess. Through coordinated killing, early humans eliminated the individualists and uncooperative types. The people who remained, our ancestors, were sensitive to negative judgements and more willing to make costly sacrifices on behalf of the group to avoid being unpopular.

The willingness to engage in a risky activity on behalf of the group is based on the capacity for patriotism (positive image of one's own group) and self-sacrifice.

"Once altruistic genes had time to establish themselves in the human gene pools," Boehm writes, "intergroup conflict was much more likely to rise to intense levels, with territorial shifts and massacres."

Fear of the group's opinion - and of punishment - keeps men humble. This is not to say that men tend to be equal from the outset. Boehm writes: "Hunter-gatherers understand human nature ... They seem to realise that a normal human leader is likely to want more if allowed to develop a little authority." The book says that both egalitarianism (equality of status) and hierarchy are "natural conditions of humanity." Everyone wants to dominate others, and everyone does not want to be dominated by others.



## **Egalitarianism is an uneasy compromise.**

As anthropologist Harold Schneider puts it, "All men want to rule, but when they cannot rule, they prefer to be equal."

Even though people tend to prefer a dominant role, they make an implicit pact with each other. Each person gives up their slim chance of becoming alpha in exchange for the certainty that no one will be alpha over them. Humans are predisposed to dominate and predisposed to reject dominance.

## **Inverted dominance hierarchies**

We are flexible in our behaviour. As Boehm puts it, "The human animal can be far more tyrannical than any despotic African ape, but it can also be more egalitarian than even the bonobo." Nevertheless, Boehm notes that humans tend to form social dominance hierarchies much like their cousins, the apes. Prehistoric hunter-gatherers countered this tendency by forming moral communities with swift and predictable punishments, just as modern hunter-gatherers do today.

Cambridge anthropologist James Woodburn theorised that human evolution followed a U-shaped curve in terms of political hierarchy. In short, our pre-human ancestors were despotic and led by alpha types, similar to the great apes. Then, at the beginning of the rise of Homo sapiens about 300,000 years ago, there was a dip - a prolonged period of equality between hunter-gatherers.

With the advent of agriculture about twelve thousand years ago, the despotic aspect of our nature finally re-emerged in the form of hierarchical chiefdoms. At this point, dominant males could amass resources, command large armies and monopolise sexual partners.

Everyone wants to be free, and everyone is extremely vigilant against any threat to their freedom. Despite this emphasis on personal autonomy, however, tribes tend to be very conformist societies.



Photo credit: istockphoto.com AdrianHillmann

## **Our natural mating system**

Back to the question of monogamy and polygyny: what is our natural mating system?

Like hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, monogamy is an uneasy trade-off. Just as people give up the small possibility of dominating others in order to achieve equality, people (or at least men) trade the small possibility of having many sexual partners for the certainty of having one. The desire for more partners, however, often does not abate. Evolutionary psychologist Steve Stewart-Williams has written that there is no perfect mating arrangement. This is because people often have multiple, incompatible desires: Long-term committed relationships satisfy the desire for intimacy and emotional commitment, but leave the desire for sexual diversity unfulfilled.



Open relationships or polygamy can fulfil the desire for variety and connection, but are often accompanied by jealousy. Stewart-Williams writes: "This is the irritating reality of the human condition: whatever we do, we are left with unfulfilled longings. Human beings are chronically conflicted animals".

The reason that hunter-gatherer communities lived relatively monogamously was that it was the only way to ensure cooperation between the men. If a man tried to claim the women for himself, the other men in the community conspired to kill him.

### **Sensitivity to social status**

Humans are "socially labile". We are capable of both dominance and submission.

However, a central point of the book is that people would prefer to dominate and are ambivalent about submitting.

**It is not so much that people love equality. It's that we refuse to be subordinated.**

The uncomfortable tension between the human desire to dominate and the desire not to be dominated means that people will never be able to live in relaxed egalitarian societies. They have to be constantly on guard against power-hungry upstarts.

### **Weapons and language gave rise to egalitarian communities.**

How did our ancestors evolve from despotic apes to egalitarian hunter-gatherers?

Three main reasons:

The invention of hunting weapons.

The advent of big game hunting.

The development of a large brain and the associated cognitive and linguistic abilities.

Early humans learned to make weapons to kill large animals. They learned that they could kill each other with these weapons without harming themselves. Especially when they have the element of surprise.

### **The enduring appeal of Marxism**

Based on the knowledge that hunter-gatherer communities are usually egalitarian, it becomes clear why communism / socialism has an enduring appeal in different cultures. And why, despite its failure and the resulting mass murders, this system was and is tried so often in different places.

Marxian socialist states have sought to implement the egalitarian ethos of hunter-gatherers on a broad scale. We humans are naturally attracted to political "deals" that supposedly free us from domination and exploitation. Such a deal is naturally attractive because we tend to reject authority.

Nevertheless, Boehm notes that the hunter-gatherers know far more about human nature than Marx and Engels. The abolition of capitalism and competition does not change the fundamental hierarchical tendencies of human beings.



So, when a social order is overthrown and disorder ensues, despotic, power-hungry men seize the opportunity to murder rivals, eliminate dissenters and establish themselves as dictators. As keen observers of human nature, the hunter-gatherers would not be surprised to learn of the rise of Napoleon, Stalin, Mao, Kim Il-sung, Fidel Castro and Pol Pot and other tyrants.

The principle of not wanting to be dominated is something I have noticed with some surprise in my own career. One impetus for my career was that I did not tolerate being led in a small way. However, I was regularly surprised that with each career step, the freedom I gained remained somewhat limited. There was always an authority to whom one had to report. Then it was no longer the country manager, but the European team. It was only when I became self-employed that this problem was solved.

In the current political discussion, especially in the context of climate change, I experience a many-voiced chorus that seems to promote the principle of equality. However, in order to prescribe rather bluntly to others how they should live. Namely, if possible, no better than the protagonists themselves. No cars, no air travel, large flats only for families. Heavy taxes on inheritances, even higher taxes for those who earn more. More transfers for the advocates themselves, i.e. state subsidies like cheap public transport. Degrowth protects the climate and one's own passivity. Less work for full pay. Apparent steps towards paradise. However, this harmonious goal picture is not argued with friendly composure, but pursued with religious zeal. The unforgiving tone on social media and the unshakeable certainty that they are treading the only right path always leaves me concerned.



## Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



#### Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:

[braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com)

The author

**Ralph Ohnemus, CEO.** Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.

Previously a client of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years.

National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions, including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications - most recently as SVP Consumer Sales responsible for marketing, sales and chain stores at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: [r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com)

