

Book Reviews

Robin Fox, *The Tribal Imagination: Civilization and the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 417 pages. ISBN 978-0674059016. Hardcover, \$29.95.

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Over 150 years after Darwin, books that explore the impact of evolution on social topics remain relatively rare. Yet, there are a few scholars upon whom we may depend to demonstrate that what is considered “social” is studied usefully through the perspective of human evolution. In line with what readers of *Politics and the Life Sciences* have come to expect over the years, anthropologist Robin Fox, University Professor of Social Theory at Rutgers University, has produced another exceptional contribution to consilient knowledge.

In a sweeping work, part memoir and part scholarly study, Fox explains why human nature is tribal and how the human tribal brain has produced a “tribal imagination” in humans. This tribal imagination influences and governs human social behavior, including our notion of time, religious belief, human rights, the logic of kin-based societies like Iraq—and why these societies have difficulties building democracy—morality, warfare, the rise of civilization, and major themes in literature, drama, and poetry.

For Fox, the tribal imagination, or the evolutionary inheritance that is human nature, is the drumbeat that allows us to understand human behavior over the ages and into the future. This imagination enables us to comprehend our ancestors and heirs. This is a powerful book—reflectively and sharply written. Writing of the importance of kin-based social structures in most societies (e.g., Afghanistan), which are necessarily kin-based because you can only really trust immediate or extended family, Fox observes that: “We in the West had to turn ‘nepotism’ and ‘corruption’ from tribal

virtues into criminal offenses, and we struggle with it. I live in New Jersey, and I stare into the pit” (p. 70).

Many of the problems and difficulties we encounter in modern life are defined by the tension between our tribal imagination, the human evolutionary legacy, and the demands of civilization. Of course, the impulse to do what has served humans well over evolutionary time may offend the norms and dictates of civilized societies. In essence, Fox’s work is a study of the origins and consequences of this tension. For this review, I will focus on two of his major contributions: his critique of how social scientists consider time by overemphasizing more recent, social and political events; and, his consideration of warfare.

Fox’s intellectual foundation is the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (EEA), which should be familiar to readers of this journal. From this genesis, he first considers time. He writes: “Our *chronomyopia*—our fixation on the present and familiar—leads us to overvalue the period of time we label ‘history’ to the point of relegating more than 99 percent of human existence to ‘prehistory’—a mere run-up to the real thing. It would be more logical to label hominids up to, say, the invention of tools, as ‘past man,’ those from thence until the Neolithic revolution as ‘present man,’” and contemporary humans as “late man” (p. 16). The human conception of time overemphasizes the immediate past and future.

Recognizing Fox’s broader conception permits us to understand that humans have not had a linear conception of time until only recently. The natural conception of time is cyclical. Weaving together insights from anthropology and political theory, Fox argues that most social scientists are only able to see events that mattered, like the Industrial Revolution, within a relatively recent historical period (p. 31). Fox recognizes that the Industrial Revolution has influenced human behavior. But to focus on it, or the Information Revolution, or any of the major social changes in recent (i.e., recorded) history, is to forget the revolution of human evolution.

In a passage that merits quoting at length, Fox artfully captures the importance of human evolution and the perspective on time it provides. If we begin with early hominids two and half million years ago at the beginning of the Paleolithic and consider what has happened since as an hour long film, considering only the film’s last minute, “roughly 40,000 years ago,

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when our few, fully modern human ancestors of the last Pleistocene/Paleolithic were coping with a major ice age, the Würm Glaciation,” then only thirty seconds ago “came the cognitive revolution of the cave-painting Cro-Magnons in southeastern Europe,” fifteen seconds ago “at the beginning of our warm interglacial came the Neolithic revolutionary and the first domestication of animals and plants,” seven seconds ago “came the first towns,” four seconds ago, “the first states and writing,” one-and-a-half seconds ago “the Roman Empire, the Han dynasty, and the Kushan empire in India, were at their height,” three-tenths of a second ago “the industrial revolution nips by in a blink before the end” (pp. 33–34). “The rise in the world’s population from a hundred million or so three seconds ago, to six and half billion at the end of the hour, would likewise only be visible only if you watched very diligently, because it happened in the last two-tenths of a second” (p. 34).

For social scientists to weight the last two-tenths of a second as the defining force in social life is to exaggerate its importance past the point of distortion and to prevent a solid comprehension of human behavior. For Fox, humans are still that

paleolithic hunter, stranded at the end of a particularly warm interglacial that we are making even warmer. We are waiting for either another tropical period that will send jungles to the poles, or more logically another ice age that will send the polar ice (and it can return as easily as it goes) rapidly toward the equator. Both could happen...They are part of that great cycle of time on which we are not even a blip. And we think we are writing the script (p. 34).

I fear that Fox’s appeal to social scientists to recognize how major social or political events fit into the tribal imagination will fall on deaf ears, at least in the near-term. I do not expect confessions of chronomyopia among the political scientists at the next annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. But works like this are making inroads into social science due to the power of their ideas and the value of the consilient approach.

The second major contribution is Fox’s argument on the importance of male bonding for warfare. Fox’s entitles his treatment “In the Company of Men,” and this is precisely the point of how the tribal imagination influences warfare. The heterosexual male-male bond is

the equal of the male-female bond in its evolutionary significance. It makes hunters, warriors, and fathers. It is ubiquitous in literature and surfaces time and again in popular culture “buddy” movies like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* or *Saving Private Ryan* “where men die for each other as surely as Romeo did for Juliet in the world’s most famous heterosexual tragedy” (p. 196). The EEA of the Upper Paleolithic explains it. “Males hunting or fighting together had to develop a special kind of trust that went beyond simple friendship as might be expressed in grooming or proximity” (p. 197). This was not as straightforward as it may appear, but was necessary for predation and protection.

What was necessary for the male bond to evolve, Fox notes, was the kind of dependence that involved, firstly, “a selection among young males for those with the right qualities (for males will differ in their bonding capacities), and...elaborate recruitment systems of trial and initiation” (p. 197). The second element “was ‘female exclusion,’ in which the heterosexual bond was ritually downgraded (as at ‘stag parties’ today) and exclusive male groups were formed, with their secret ceremonies, oaths, and sanctions” (p. 197). The obvious tension with the heterosexual bond necessary for reproduction yields endless fodder for literature, poetry, mythology, and philosophy, as well as sit-coms, romantic comedies, and shows that highlight the “battle of the sexes.” Men can be “ambivalent about the heterosexual bond insofar as it threatened the male association,” whereas women “find the demands of the male group equally threatening to the needs of the family” (p. 197).

The implications of the male bond for ancient and modern warfare are profound. For ancient warfare, the male bond makes warfare possible and serves as the foundation for military organization necessary, at first, for hunting and raiding. Later, it allows the organized battle defined in classical warfare by the Greek phalanx or the form of battle in premodern societies, such as New Guinea, identified by anthropologists.

The male bond remains central to modern warfare. Although in Western societies, its importance is often not understood by those outside of the military. The bond must be created to generate trust in combat. That trust yields cohesiveness and fighting effectiveness. It permits men to make exceptional sacrifices in battle and sustain themselves in the most stressful of battles, as they have done throughout time. That was true at Adrianople, Waterloo, the Somme, Stalingrad, or

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Fallujah. “Males who bond will have allies they can trust; it is that simple” (p. 221). That is also true of men in other less stressful competitive environments, for example, in business, government, or sports.

Once the bond is created, its potency cannot be denied. Fox writes: “The depth of emotional attachment between men of the same platoon or company who have shared terrifying experiences and risked their lives for each other is real and always moving....[N]o one who has witnessed the reunion of those baptized together in fierce battle, or seen the tears shed over fallen comrades, can doubt that this is one of the most powerful emotional bonds known to us” (pp. 222–223). Some men may fight for their country, ideology, or religion, but all men fight for their band of brothers.

Much of the thrust of Fox’s book is at odds with the move toward a unisex military in the last 15 years. The consequences of diluting the male bond (directly and indirectly) by allowing women a greater role in the United States military is not part of the public or policy debate. It should be. Decision makers need to understand and take Fox’s arguments seriously. The tribal imagination cannot be wished away. It may take time, but science will trump ideology.

Upon reflection, this is a powerful and provocative work. Each of the thirteen chapters contains insightful considerations and evaluations. To take one example, Fox’s treatment of human rights is golden. Human rights have been too narrowly focused for too long. The tribal imagination gives us insight into what is truly human in human rights—there is no human right

for polygamy or for revenge, but the tribal imagination says there should be.

The limitations of the work are few. As this work is part memoir, Fox offers reflections and observations from his career in discrete sections in the text. Accordingly, readers should not expect the flow of a purely academic work. For some readers, this might be a flaw, but I found it refreshing as Fox offers his insights on numerous topics, or takes a moment to provide a judicious comment or, perhaps, a biting one. Many of his considerations or examples are drawn from literature. This is perfectly appropriate since great authors capture well the drumbeats of human nature. I was greatly impressed with Fox’s depth of understanding of literature and wonder if he does not moonlight as a professor of literature.

Perhaps the greatest value of the book is what Fox shares with us concerning his career. Implicitly, he demonstrates to young anthropologists that a career spent illuminating the drumbeats of human nature, discovering how the tribal imagination continues to affect human lives and the human condition, in essence, putting the *human* in anthropology, is one well spent. Though too seldom taught, that lesson is important, and is one that should be reinforced and broadened to include all social sciences. Those who want to know humans need to understand Fox’s drumbeats of human nature. At the end of the day, whether social scientists accept Fox’s argument is immaterial at the most profound level. The tribal imagination exists, and it will remain analytically insightful, vexing, and humbling for all who truly want to comprehend human behaviors.