

Emotion, politics, and cooperation *Foundations of modern civilization*

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 262 pages. ISBN: 978-0691151250. Hardcover \$42.00.

W. Russell Neuman, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler, and Michael MacKuen (Eds.), *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 432 pages. ISBN: 978-0226574424. Softcover \$27.50.

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Embracing the situation, is our only chance to be free. . . I'll side with you, if you side with me.

– Jeff Tweedy, “Side with the Seeds”

We are generally an emotional bunch, and it is a good thing, because our emotions are one of the foundations of modern civilization. This is one of several key insights gained from two important contributions to the emerging synthesis of the behavioral and life sciences, *A Cooperative Species* and *The Affect Effect*.

In *A Cooperative Species*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis draw on decades of their own work and that of others to explore the existence and origins of what they call “strong reciprocity”: social preferences for rewarding cooperation at a personal cost and punishing noncooperation (free-riding) even when no immediate gain can be expected from the punishment. Along the way, they provide one of the best summaries of social evolutionary theory available today, reviewing models of altruism, punishment, information processing, gene-culture coevolution, and cultural-institutional

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coevolution as well as the evolution of guilt, shame, and related social emotions. For those familiar with formal modeling of genetic and cultural traits, this is a fairly accessible yet comprehensive set of arguments and analysis. Key formal concepts are only as complex as necessary and details are kept in appendices.

The Affect Effect brings together some 30 scholars, ranging from philosophers and political scientists to psychologists, sociologists, and at least one professional consultant, each of whom approaches the study of emotion from a variety of perspectives. Readers are treated to analyses and reviews that draw on a variety of methods including experiments, surveys, content analysis, aggregate historical data, dynamic tracing, facial electromyographics, and fMRI measurements of brain activity. The book is organized in micro-macro fashion, providing readers with a holistic vision of the channels through which emotions shape political decisions and outcomes, from the level of the individual cell to large-scale political systems across time.

Both books make important contributions to our understanding of the nature and function of emotions in politics, including the evolution of emotion and cognition and their linkages to democratic governance. At the same time, gaps in our understanding of emotions and cognition are revealed, gaps that demand further attention. While the game-theoretic modeling employed in *A Cooperative Species* and parts of the statistical analyses in *The Affect Effect* will be a challenge for the uninitiated, the substantive results and narratives of these works are accessible to any readers who have been drawn to previous scholarship on topics ranging from cooperation and trust to deception, coalitional psychology and collective action, and the emergence and performance of political institutions. Both the contributions and the unresolved dilemmas should be of interest to anyone with sufficient background in the behavioral or life sciences.

The notion that we engage emotions in political decision making goes back to the Ancients, yet in recent decades, the dominance of rational choice models of utility maximizing, self-regarding behavior in political science put the study of emotion on the

back burner. For their part, Bowles and Gintis have been fighting against the self-interest axiom of classical economics their entire careers, and in chapter 3 of *A Cooperative Species*, they persuasively demonstrate the ubiquity of reciprocity and altruism in humans. In perhaps the simplest case, they review the results of ultimatum game experiments: one-shot anonymous interactions in which a “proposer” is instructed to offer a “responder” from zero to all of the dollars allocated to the proposer for the experiment. If the responder accepts, the money is allocated accordingly, but if the responder rejects, both players receive nothing. In practice and in contrast to self-interest maximization, proposers rarely offer the minimum to responders. These and similar results are interpreted as violating the self-interest axiom, because both parties appear to be sensitive to norms of fairness to the extent that proposers typically offer 40 to 50 percent of their allocation and responders willingly give up small offers in order to punish stingy proposers.

Non-economists may wonder about the need to demonstrate the existence of such reciprocity, a concept brilliantly explored in the pioneering work of Robert Trivers.¹ But Bowles and Gintis seek to model how social emotions foster large-scale cooperation. Specifically, the authors argue that love, pride, guilt, shame, envy, and related social emotions trigger behaviors of attraction, aversion and/or correction toward the behavior of others. From there, they develop a utility function that consists of material payoffs, reciprocity, and guilt or shame in response to one’s own and others’ actions in order to show how shame enhances the impact of altruistic punishment and, thus, the cooperative capacity and reproductive fitness of individuals in groups with altruistic punishers (see chapter 7).

Similarly, the general account of emotion in *The Affect Effect* is that it functions like an extended acute stress response (fight or flight) system: anxiety triggered in an adverse political environment stimulates awareness and information processing capacity. In Affective Intelligence Theory, which serves as a conceptual anchoring point of the book, anxiety and enthusiasm are modeled as negative and positive valences of general avoidance and attraction. For example, Mackuen and colleagues in chapter 6 show that partisan supporters of successful governing administrations become anxious about increased opposition over time, which reduces habituated (partisan) evaluation and

increases the probability of partisan defection. This dual process model, where emotion, which is associated with automatic or subconscious processing that works on “controlled” cognitive function, is also scrutinized, with results that raise more questions than answers. Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese in chapter 9 find that anxiety and anger are distinct negative emotions. Whereas anxiety toward Saddam Hussein and terrorists during the Iraq War heightened perceived risk and opposition to the war, anger dampened perceived risk and enhanced support for the war. Similarly, Brader and Valentino in chapter 8 find that anger, but not anxiety, is linked to out-group prejudice toward immigrants. Different negative emotions appear to work on cognition in different directions.

The theory of affective intelligence holds that “emotion’s impact is largely functional and rational” (p. 126), as it shakes us out of habitual thinking and moves us closer to the rational ideal. Alternatively, Cassino and Lodge in chapter 5 marshal previous research and their own innovative reaction-time study to reinforce what has been the dominant perspective in political science: rather than motivating active learning, affect can contribute to biased information processing and selective perception. On this account, not only are emotion-based evaluations normatively undesirable, but also “thinking systematically about the pros and cons of candidates and issues may be impossible for much if not all of the polity” (p. 121). Our “folkloric accounts of cause and effect” that prioritize the role of reflective cognition may invert the causal priority of automatic and reflective response.

Many readers will come away convinced, like Darren Schreiber in chapter 3, that the boundaries between reflective thought and reflexive emotions are “fuzzy at best.” His excellent review of the literature reveals the promise of a more “Machiavellian” perspective on intelligence,² where selective pressures favoring a coalitional psychology emerged through “disputes with family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances” to be “the driving force behind the cognitive arms race evolving humans” (p. 69). In contrast to the tone struck by Lodge and his colleagues, Schreiber argues that these coalitional traits have “given most people sufficient capability to keep from getting killed or exiled as a consequence of bad choices made in their local political environment” (p. 59).

Today, these capabilities can be co-opted for participation in large-scale political institutions.

Cognition can thus be understood as a complex extension of our automatic response system, a claim eloquently developed by the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, and an increasingly controversial topic at the intersection of political and brain science.³ However, if the results in *The Affect Effect* are any indication, political psychology is a long way from dissolving the conceptual barrier between deterministically firing neurons and intentional consciousness. The dual process model is viable, for now, but these studies make it clear that both emotion and cognition are too under theorized in the behavioral sciences. Nardulli and Kuklinski's macro-level analysis in chapter 13 demonstrates some of the difficulties in inferring aggregate pattern implications from the current micro-level theory, especially when the influence of discrete emotions (when they are discrete?) may be task-specific.

Considering the origin of social emotions is a possible way of establishing stronger theoretic foundations, and Bowles and Gintis in *A Cooperative Species* devote substantial energy to this task. In an impressive exploration that incorporates historical data as well as analytic and agent-based modeling, the authors develop the claim that human cooperation and social emotions emerged out of severe selective pressures like warfare. Beginning with the standard puzzle of cooperation, in which altruistic traits are difficult to sustain in a population of exploitative egoists, Bowles and Gintis demonstrate that altruism can spread when it is virtually the only option that will not lead to death at the hands of another group or punishment from one's own group members. Under conditions of war, for example, the selective pressure favoring altruism for the group is greater than the selective pressure against altruism at the individual level. The elimination of less altruistic groups at the hands of altruists allows the altruistic traits to spread.

Similarly, Bowles and Gintis argue that the capacity to internalize norms and express them through shame and moralistic aggression provided an individual selective advantage because it facilitated self-control, even when the costs of antisocial action are unknown or undervalued. In turn, the authors argue that "groups in which shame is common can sustain high levels of group cooperation at limited cost and will be more likely to

survive environmental, military and other challenges, and thus to populate new sites vacated by groups that failed" (p. 193). Once established, institutions that regulate competition and the internalization of norms (like religion and government) become themselves subject to selective pressures, initiating co-evolution between cultural values and political institutions.

A Cooperative Species also draws readers into the heated and prolonged scientific debate regarding group selection in evolution. Proponents of the dominant "gene's eye" view should at least appreciate the sophisticated treatment given to selection in *A Cooperative Species*. First, W. D. Hamilton's concept of inclusive fitness, the idea that an organism can increase its reproductive success by improving the survival and reproduction of similar organisms, is the central driving force of the book. Bowles and Gintis are also specific in their approach and, in an effort to avoid confusion, opt for the term multilevel selection in order to emphasize their point that selective pressures can operate at a variety of levels including genes, chromosomes, cells, individuals, ecosystems, and institutions. Their account is a combination of group and individual-level selection.

As others have repeatedly pointed out, however, group selection models are mathematically equivalent but usually more complex versions of individual-level selection models (e.g., West, El Mouden, and Gardner)⁴, and Bowles and Gintis fail to sufficiently engage the empirical literature on individual-level explanations of cooperation in groups (e.g., Price and Johnson).⁵ Yet they provide a systemic perspective that will hopefully contribute to more rigorous political theorizing about the institutional implications of human cognition, like that called for by many of the scholars in *The Affect Effect*. Those of us who are committed to the design of stable, responsive political systems need to account for the consequences of multilevel cultural selection, the regulation of in-group competition, and the potential of constitutional democracy as a major transition in human development.

Both of these books should become important resources for students of politics who have the requisite background in the behavioral sciences and wish to develop an integrated, life science perspective in their own work. Psychologists, anthropologists and behavioral economists are now enjoying the fruit of having adopted an evolutionary perspective; it is high time

that political scientists take note. These books provide strong support that coalitional politics lies at the heart of evolution, and of what it means to be human.

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