

FOLLOW MY LEADER¹

Ian Kershaw, in his new biography of Hitler², quotes a teenage girl, writing to celebrate Hitler's 50th birthday in April 1939: "a great man, a genius, a person sent to us from heaven". What kind of design-flaw in human nature could be responsible for such a seemingly grotesque piece of hero-worship? Why do people in general fall so easily under the sway of dictators?

I shall make a simple suggestion at the end of this chapter. But I shall not go straight there. The invitation to talk about "Dictatorship: the Seduction of the Masses" in a seminar on "History and Human Nature", has set me thinking more generally about the role of evolutionary theory in understanding human history. And I've surprised myself by some of my own thoughts. I'll come to dictatorship in a short while, but I want to establish a particular framework first.

The usual reason that's given for paying attention to evolutionary psychology is that, by exposing and explaining human nature, it can show us the *constraints* that have operated – and still do – on the historical development of human culture. I'll quote if I may from the manifesto I myself wrote for the Darwin Centre at the London School of Economics:

Evolutionary theory leads us to expect that, to the extent that human beings have evolved to function optimally under the particular social and ecological conditions that prevailed long ago, they are likely still today to be better suited to certain life-styles and environments than others. What's more they can be expected to bring with them into modern contexts archaic ways of thinking, preferences and prejudices, even when these are no longer adaptive (or even positively maladaptive).

The emphasis, you'll see, is on how nature and culture *conflict*. "We're stone-age creatures living in the space-age", as the saying goes. And the implication is that the modernising forces of culture have continually to fight a rearguard battle against the recidivist tendencies of human nature. Almost every evolutionary psychology textbook ends with a sermon on the importance of getting in touch with our "inner Flintstone" if we are not to have our best laid plans for taking charge of history thwarted.

This idea of human nature and human culture pulling inexorably in different directions is of course hardly a new one, although arguably we can give it more of a scientific base than in the past. It was anticipated by Hobbes, by Rousseau, and of course by Freud. Denis Diderot put it strikingly in his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, in 1784:³

Would you like to know the condensed history of almost all our miseries? Here it is. There existed a natural man; an artificial man was introduced within this man; and within this cavern a civil war breaks out which lasts for life.

It's not new . . . and I'm beginning to realise that in large measure *it's not true*. Indeed the very opposite is true. If we take a fresh look at how natural and artificial man coexist in contemporary societies, what we see in many areas is evidence not of an ongoing civil war but of a remarkable collaboration between these supposed old enemies. We see that stone-age nature and space-age culture – or at any rate modern industrial culture – very often get along just fine.

So much so, that perhaps it's time we shifted our concerns, and started emphasising not how human nature resists desirable cultural developments but how it eases the path of some of the least desirable. For the fact is – the worry is, the embarrassment is – that human nature may sometimes be not just a collaborator but an active *collaborateur* with the invader.

True, once we do focus on collaboration, for the most part we'll find the result productive and benign. Think of the major achievements of modern civilisation – in science, the arts, politics, communication, commerce. Every one has depended on cultural forces working with the natural gifts of human beings. Our incomparable mental gifts: the capacity for language, reasoning, socialising, understanding, feeling with others. Equally our incomparable bodily gifts: our nimble fingers, expressive faces, graceful limbs. We have only to look at our nearest relatives, the ungainly lumbering chimpanzees, whose minds can scarcely frame a concept and whose hands can hardly hold a pencil, to see how near a thing it was. Tamper with the human genome ever so little, and the glories of civilisation would topple like a pack of cards.

Would you like to know the condensed history of almost all our *satisfactions*? Here it is. There existed a natural man; an artificial man was introduced within this man; and within this cavern a *creative alliance is formed* which lasts for life.

That's the good news. But what about the bad? Think of the worst achievements of civilisation: war, genocide, capitalist greed, religious bigotry, alienation, drug addiction, pornography, the despoliation of the earth, the dreariness of urban life. Every one of these too has come about through cultural forces working with the natural gifts of individual human beings. Our incomparable talents for aggression, competition, deceit, xenophobia, superstition, obedience, love of status, demonic ingenuity. We have only to look at chimpanzees to see how nearly we could have avoided it. Chimpanzees are hardly capable even of telling a simple lie.

Would you like to know the condensed history of almost all our miseries [again]? Here it is. There existed a natural man; an artificial man was introduced within this man; and within this cavern *a perfidious conspiracy arises* which lasts for life.

Yet, you may want to object that this way of putting things makes no sense scientifically. What justification can there be for talking, even at the level of metaphor, of natural and artificial man being “at war”, or “collaborating” or “forming alliances” – as if human nature and human culture really do have independent goals? Don’t theorists these days think in terms of gene-culture co-evolution: with human beings being by nature creatures that make culture which in turn feeds back to nature and so on, in a cycle of dependent interaction – for which the bottom line always remains natural selection?

Indeed isn’t much of human culture, including many aspects of civilisation, best thought of as part of the extended human phenotype, indirectly constructed by the human genes that it helps preserve – rather as, say, a beaver’s dam is indirectly constructed by the beaver’s genes? No one talks about an “alliance” between a beaver and its dam (let alone a war).

Yes, except that to an audience of historians I need hardly say that any such view of human culture – as on a par with the beaver’s dam or even the tool-making traditions of chimpanzees – ignores precisely what it is that makes human culture special. I say “precisely what it is” . . . and no doubt everyone would want to be precise in different ways. But what *I* mean here is that once a culture becomes the creation of thousands upon thousands of semi-autonomous individual agents, each with the capacity to act both as an originator of ideas and as a vehicle and propagandist for them, it becomes *a complex dynamical system*: a system which now has *its own developmental drive* – no longer ruled by natural selection, but ruled by whatever principles do rule such complex systems.

We are only just beginning to understand what these principles are. Nobody believes any longer that Hegelian laws dictate the course of human history. Few believe in the Marxist version (though perhaps more should – Engels’ remarkable book *Dialectics of Nature* anticipated in several ways modern ideas about complexity and chaos). Even Adam Smith’s hidden hand of capitalism has been relegated to the nursery. But that there *are* laws of development, theorists are increasingly confident. And certain central concepts are becoming established. Probably the most important, simple and easy to understand is the idea of “attractors”.

Attractors are just that – basins of attraction, places where complex systems tend to end up *as if they were drawn there*. They are semi-stable states of equilibrium, in a sea of instability – like whirlpools in the wide ocean tending to catch within them anything that strays

into their fields of influence (although they do not of course literally pull). Weather systems, economies, fashions, ecosystems, dripping taps, traffic-flow along motorways – all tend to settle into discrete attractor states.

Now, the existence of attractors does not of course mean that, strictly speaking, the system that exhibits these attractors has its own *goals* (certainly not consciously formulated). An economy headed for recession doesn't exactly "want" to get there. Nonetheless it will seem to anyone caught up in such a recession, or it might be in an artistic movement, a religious crusade, or a slide toward war, that he is part of something larger than himself with its own life force. While being one of the players whose joint effects produce the movement, he does not have to play any intentional part in it. Indeed even in fighting it he may ironically promote it, or in embracing it oppose it.

In short, nature and culture *can* be thought of as having independent tendencies and independent energies. Diderot's natural man, *as an individual*, will go his own way, but there will be emergent forces *at the group level* creating the movement towards the cultural attractor where Diderot's artificial man is at home.

So, now's the point: Whether natural man intends it or not, his going his own way is likely to have interesting and possibly quite unpredicted consequences at the cultural level. And this is because - as complexity theory makes clear - the determination of which particular states are in fact attractors, and how easily transitions occur between them, is often highly sensitive to small changes in the properties of the elements that comprise the system. Adjust the stickiness of sand particles in the desert ever so slightly, and whole dune systems will come into being or vanish. Adjust the saving or spending habits of people in the market by a few percentage points and the whole economy can be tipped in or out of recession. So: adjust human nature in other small ways and maybe human society as a whole can be unexpectedly switched from Victorian values to flower power, from capitalism to socialism, from theism to atheism, and so on? (Well, no: atheism is probably never an attractor!)

There. That is my preamble. And I'm ready now to address the subject I was asked to: the question of *the attractions of Dictatorship*.

As Plato noted, the political landscape contains several distinct, relatively stable forms of government. He named them as: Timarchy, Oligarchy, Democracy, Tyranny, and of course his own Ideal Republic (which was itself a form of benevolent dictatorship.) Moreover, as if foreseeing complexity theory, Plato drew attention to the critical influence of human personality in rendering these states more or less stable: because, as he said, "Societies aren't made of sticks and stones, but of men whose individual characters, by turning the scale one way or another, determine the direction of the whole."⁴

Now, as Plato also noted, some of these attractors are nearer neighbours than others (because they are relatively similar in character), and some have higher transition probabilities between them (because there are, as it were, downhill routes connecting them). I may surprise you – though not for long – when I say I think Democracy and Dictatorship are close in both respects.

Dictatorship, let's be clear, does not mean any kind of authoritarian regime. It involves, as the title of this seminar suggests, "the seduction of the masses". Dictatorship emerges where an individual or clique takes over power, usually at a time of crisis, on behalf of and often with the support of the people, and substitutes personal authority for the rule of law. As Carl Schmitt defined it: "dictatorship is the subordination of law to the rule of an executive power, exceptionally and temporarily commissioned in the name of the people to undertake all necessary acts for the sake of legal order."⁵

What makes dictatorship, in this sense, close to democracy is quite simply that both are *popular* forms of government: people love them. Indeed sometimes dictatorships command the people's love beyond anything that democracy can normally muster. The Nuremberg rallies, the huge outpourings of love and admiration for Mao Tse Tung, even the lingering adoration shown in some quarters for fallen dictators such as Slobodan Milosevic testify to the way people genuinely take to their hearts those who, even while oppressing them, claim to represent them.

It means that the transition from democracy to dictatorship can feel (at least to begin with) like a continuation of democracy by other means. A government of the people for the people by the people has become a government of the people for the people by something else. But it will not necessarily feel as if power has been given up because in a sense it has not: the something else is also there by the people's will. In the case of Hitler, for example, "the Fuhrer's word was supposed to be law not because it was the will of a particular individual but because it was supposed to embody the will of the German people more authentically than could any representation."⁶

The transition therefore may not be resisted as perhaps it should be. But that is by no means the full story. For there may be a positive energies as well, tending to drive society towards the beckoning attractor of dictatorship. And they may arise, I believe, from a wholly familiar (if little understood) aspect of individual human psychology: the everyday, taken for granted, but insidious phenomenon of *suggestibility* – the tendency of human beings, in certain circumstances, especially when stressed, to surrender their capacity for self-determination and self-control to someone else.

Suggestibility shows up as a human personality trait in two main ways. To start with, there is the simple tendency to *conform*, to adopt the wishes and opinions of *the majority* as

one's own. The power of conformity was famously illustrated in Solomon Asch's experiment where he showed how group pressure can distort a person's judgement even about such a simple matter as the length of a line. Conformity has been shown to be a powerful force in contexts ranging from shopping behaviour (so that people want to buy what lots of other people buy) to mate choice (so that, yes, people want to have sex with the person lots of other people want to have sex with). We all do it, we can't help it. On the whole it doesn't get us into trouble.

But besides this, and more obviously dangerous, is the tendency to *yield to authority*, to identify with the wishes and opinions of *a leader*. This too shows up, for example, in shopping behaviour (people want to buy what the top people buy) and again in mate choice (people want to have sex with the person a top person chooses to have sex with). It plays a central role in the strange, but generally innocuous, phenomenon of hypnosis. It is seen more worryingly in examples of the so-called Stockholm syndrome, where individuals who find themselves in the power of a captor or abuser come to identify with and bond with the person into whose power they have fallen. It was demonstrated most dramatically in Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments, where he showed how easily ordinary people will take orders from an assumed expert even when it involves hurting another person.

Now, though these various forms of suggestibility have long been established as facts of human nature, from the evolutionary perspective they have seemed something of a puzzle. Just recently, however, theorists have gone part of the way to solving this puzzle by thinking about suggestibility in the context of the *evolution of cooperation*.

Joseph Henrich and Robert Boyd have shown, with a theoretical model, that if human beings do indeed show *both* these forms of suggestibility – that's to say, if they have a psychological bias to copy the majority (which Henrich and Boyd call “conformist transmission”), *and* a bias to copy successful individuals (which they call “payoff-biased transmission”) – then these two factors by themselves will be sufficient to account for the spread of cooperation as a stable feature of human groups⁷.

It's not hard to see, informally, why. Imagine two groups, A and B, in the first of which everyone cooperates, and in the second they do not. Assume that individuals in group A generally do better for themselves than those in group B because cooperation leads to more food, better health and so on. Then, when individuals in group B have occasion to observe the relative success of those in group A, payoff-biased transmission will see to it that they tend to adopt these cooperative individuals as role models and begin cooperating themselves. And then, once enough individuals in group B are doing this, conformist transmission will take over and sweep the whole group internally towards cooperation.

To put this still more simply: If people follow the winners, and people follow the crowd, then they will end up following the crowd following the winners. And, hey presto, everyone's a winner!

Since being one of the winners does bring obvious benefits to individuals and their genes, it seems clear from this model why both these forms of suggestibility should in fact have been bred into human nature by natural selection. Suggestibility, far from being a design flaw in itself, will have been one of the basic adaptive traits that has underwritten the development of human social and economic life. But if this is indeed our stone-age heritage, how does it play now? If not necessarily in the space-age, then in the age of nation states and mass politics?

I would say that this is the very package of traits that, as Plato put it, "by turning the scale one way or another, determines the direction of the whole" and continually threatens to make democracy unstable and dictatorship a particularly likely end-point.

For the fact is that democracy, for which one of the essential conditions is the exercise of individual choice, is dreadfully vulnerable to the block vote. And what suggestibility will tend to do is precisely to turn independent choosers into block voters. If people follow the charismatic leader, Hitler, Mao, and they follow the crowd, then they will end up following the crowd following the charismatic leader. And hey presto, everyone's a servant of dictatorship.

Yet what creates such charisma in the first place? In the situation that Henrich and Boyd have modelled, the thing that makes suggestibility an *adaptive* strategy is that the leaders, around whom the process crystallises, have genuinely admirable qualities. However, it is easy to see how, once suggestibility is in place, there is the danger of a much less happy outcome, perhaps rare until the advent of modern propaganda, but always latent. This is that *a leader's charisma will derive from nothing else than the support he is seen to be being given by the crowd*. So that a figure who would otherwise never be taken seriously can become the subject of runaway idolatry. Just as a film star can become famous for little other than being famous, a leader can become popular by virtue of little other than his popularity.

Wherein lay Hitler's mesmerising power? Maybe it was due to some of the personal qualities that Kershaw identifies – rhetorical skill, raging temper, paranoia, vanity. But maybe it was due to nothing other than the luck of being the focus of a critical mass of zealots at a critical time.

Remember that shocking newspaper headline (see Chapter 23): "Archduke Ferdinand still alive: First World War a mistake"? Perhaps we could have capped it with this: "Second World War a mistake: Hitler a twerp." A twerp. But nonetheless, to that young girl and so many others of her compatriots whose own breath created the twisting wind that sent him skywards, "a great man, a genius, a person sent to us from heaven".

It can happen with ideas as well. Take the case of Soviet Communism. J. M. Keynes wrote: “How a doctrine so illogical and so dull can have exercised so powerful and enduring an influence over the minds of men, and, through them, the events of history must always remain a portent to historians of opinion.”⁸ A portent to students of human nature too.

1. Talk given at the Institute of Historical Research, 6th June 2001, in a seminar on “Dictatorship: the Seduction of the Masses.”
2. Ian Kershaw, 2000, *Hitler, 1936-45: Nemesis*, London: Allen Lane.
3. Denis Diderot, 1772 / 1937, *Supplement to the Voyage of M. Bougainville*, Part IV, in *Diderot, Interpreter of Nature: Selected Writings*, trans. J. Stewart and J. Kemp, p.187, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
4. Plato, 1955, *The Republic*, trans. H.D.P.Lee, p. 314, Harmondsworth: Penguin
5. Carl Schmitt quoted by Andrew Arato, 2000, “Goodbye to Dictatorships?”, *Social Research*, 67, 925-955.
6. Andrew Arato, 2000, op. cit. p. 943; compare Heidegger’s speech as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933: “Not theorems and rules ought to be the rules of your Being. The *Führer* himself personifies German reality and its law for today and the future”.
7. Joseph Henrich and Robert Boyd, 2001, “Why people punish defectors”, *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 208, 79; 1998, “The evolution of conformist transmission and the emergence of between-group differences”, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 19, 215-241; see also Joseph Henrich and Francisco J. Gil-White, 2001, “The evolution of prestige: freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission”, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 22, 165-196.
8. John Maynard Keynes, 1926, *The End of Laissez-Faire*, p. 3, London: Hogarth Press.