

Gender egalitarianism made us human: patriarchy was too little, too late

The original rule was that against rape, 'No means NO', a woman's body is sacred if she says so. Here is my story about how that rule arose.

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31 August 2018

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A Hadza female coalition on the warpath, hunting down boys during their maitoko ceremony. Chris Knight. All rights reserved.

“It’s not Me Too. It’s not just sexual harassment. It’s an anti-patriarchy movement. Time’s up on 10,000 years of recorded history. This is coming. This is real... You watch. Women are gonna take charge of society.”

So spoke former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon at a Golden Globes dinner last February where actors wore black – a symbol of sexual refusal – to protest sexual abuse. It’s doubtful Bannon had boned up on his anthropology and archaeology in reaching for the 10,000-year date, but he was joining a recent debate on the lifespan and ‘natural history’ of patriarchy.

About a month after Bannon’s pronouncements, two lefty University of London professors, David Graeber and David Wengrow, rewrote ‘the narrative of human history’. They attacked the ‘myth’ that humans had once enjoyed equality and freedom in hunter-gatherer bands, until the invention of farming sent us down the road to social inequality (and Bannon-style patriarchy). So while the alt-right-winger appears to be setting a limit to patriarchy as a historic phenomenon, the anarchists seem to believe it extends all the way back to our very origins.

Disturbingly, I think Bannon is correct, both on the coming power of anti-patriarchy and in his assessment of male dominance as recent history – not human nature. The anarchist professors, because they are gender-blind in their analysis on the history of equality, have got it wrong. Disturbingly, I think Bannon is correct, both on the coming power of anti-patriarchy and in his assessment of male dominance as recent history – not human nature.

The main reasons Graeber and Wengrow are disqualified from speaking about human origins are that they give no context of evolution; they don’t deal with sex and gender; and they leave out Africa, the continent on which we evolved as modern humans.

Let’s be clear. Bannon/Trump are the enemy, the epitome of patriarchy, the clear and present danger to our planet. I intend to do everything I can to make Bannon’s words come true. This is why it matters that the London professors are undermining our current understanding of how recent patriarchy is in our history, and how little it has contributed to making us the species we are.

I want to present evidence that gender egalitarianism was pivotal to the evolution of our language-speaking ancestors. I’ll ask whether it makes a difference if our modern human bodies and minds evolved through a prolonged period of increasing egalitarianism. Would it help us if we were designed by natural and sexual selection to be happy and healthy in egalitarian conditions? If so, then perhaps the positive question that needs asking first is not ‘how did we get to be unequal?’ but ‘how did we first become equal?’

Egalitarian bodies and minds

Let's begin with the biology. Perhaps the hallmark of our egalitarian nature is the design of our eyes. We are the only one of well over 200 primate species to have evolved eyes with an elongated shape and a bright white sclera background to a dark iris. Known as 'cooperative eyes', they invite anyone we interact with to see easily what we are looking at. By contrast, great apes have round, dark eyes, making it very difficult to judge their eye direction. Like mafia dons wearing sunglasses, they watch other animal's moves intently, but disguise their thoughts from others. This suits a primate world of Machiavellian competition.

Our eyes are adapted for mutual mindreading, also called intersubjectivity; our closest relatives block this off. To look into each other's eyes, asking 'can you see what I see?' and 'are you thinking what I am thinking?' is completely natural to us, from an early age. Staring into the eyes of other primate species is taken as a threat. This tells us immediately that we evolved along a different path from our closest primate relatives.

In *Mothers and Others*, the most important book on human evolution published this century, the outstanding Darwinian feminist Sarah Hrdy gives a convincing account of how, why and when this happened. She presents a straightforward argument. We do babysitting in all human societies, mothers being happy to hand over their offspring for others to look after temporarily. African hunter-gatherers are the champions of this collective form of childcare, indicating that it was routine in our heritage. In stark contrast, great ape mothers – chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang utans – do not let their babies go. Because of the risks of harm to their infants, they are hyperpossessive and protective, not daring to take the chance.

This particularly applies to great apes. Monkeys behave differently, being prepared to leave a baby with a trusted relative. Old World monkey mothers usually live with female relatives: great ape mothers don't. This means ape mothers have no one nearby whom they can trust sufficiently. This is telling us something significant about the social conditions in which we evolved. Our foremothers must have been living close to trusted female relatives, the most reliable in the first place being a young mother's own mother. This 'grandmother hypothesis' has been used to explain our long post-reproductive lifespans – the evolution of menopause.

Hrdy explores how multi-parental care shaped the evolution of our species' unique psychological nature. While cooperative childcare may start with the mother-daughter relationship, bonding with grandchildren quickly leads to the involvement of aunts, sisters, older daughters and other trusted relatives. From the moment when mothers allow others to hold their babies, says Hrdy, selection pressures for new kinds of mind-reading are established. These give rise to novel responses – mutual gazing, babbling, kissfeeding and so forth – which enable this variegated triad of mum, baby and new helper to consolidate bonds while monitoring one another's intentions. Within a few short hours after birth, a baby in an African hunter-gatherer camp will have been held

by numerous relatives and friends, of both sexes. Within a few short hours after birth, a baby in an African hunter-gatherer camp will have been held by numerous relatives and friends, of both sexes.

The most salient feature of our anatomy distinguishing us from other apes is the extraordinary size of our brains. While a human and chimp mother have a fairly similar body weight, adult humans today have upwards of three times the brain volume of a chimp. Brain tissue is very expensive in terms of energy requirements. Doing the whole job by themselves, great ape mothers are constrained in the amount of energy they can provide to offspring and so apes cannot expand brains above what is known as a 'gray ceiling' (600 cc). Our ancestors smashed through this ceiling some 1.5-2 million years ago with the emergence of *Homo erectus*, who had brains more than twice the volume of chimps today. This tells us that cooperative childcare was already part of *Homo erectus* society, with concomitant features of evolving cooperative eyes and emergent intersubjectivity.

We can track the degree of egalitarianism in the societies of descendants of *Homo erectus*, by measuring brain sizes in these early humans, using the fossil record. From 6-700,000 years ago we begin to see cranial values in the modern human range, three times as large as present day chimps. From half a million years ago, for both African (modern human ancestor) and Eurasian (Neanderthal ancestor) populations, brain size accelerates rapidly. What we find evidenced in the fossil record is materially more energy for females and their offspring. This implies an inevitable gendering of the strategies that enabled this to happen.

Any tendency to male dominance and strategic control of females would have obstructed these unprecedented increases of brain size. While there must have been variability in the degree of dominance or egalitarianism among human groups, we can be confident that those populations where male dominance, sexual conflict and infanticide risks remained high were not the ones who became our ancestors. Our forebears were the ones who somehow solved the problem of great ape male dominance, instead harnessing males into routine support of these extraordinarily large-brained offspring.

Machiavellian intelligence

One key question is what drove the increase of brain size. Brains are wonderful to have if you can afford them. But such large increases of brain size are vanishingly rare in evolution because of the expense. What are these large brains for? One major hypothesis is the Social Brain theory. This relates brain size, specifically the size of the neocortex, across primate species, to the degree of social complexity, the network of relationships that any individual needs to deal with. This can be measured by average group sizes for any particular species, or sizes of coalitions and cliques within social groups. One version of the 'social brain' focuses on specifically *female* group sizes as most critical in driving the evolution of intelligence.

The original idea behind social brain was called Machiavellian intelligence. This switched the focus of understanding the evolution of intelligence from technology and foraging to social relationships. Machiavellian intelligence is a subtle idea that sees animals in complex social groups competing in evolutionary terms by becoming more adept at cooperation, and more capable of negotiating alliances. So in this theoretical perspective, the significant increases of brain size in the primate order, from monkeys to apes, then from apes to hominins, result from increasing political complexity and the ability to create alliances.

Egalitarianism is difficult to explain using Darwinian theory premised on competition. Andrew Whiten, one of the inventors of Machiavellian intelligence theory, and his student David Erdal saw that Machiavellian intelligence could generate the difference between primate-style dominance hierarchies and typical hunter-gatherer egalitarianism.

At a certain point, the ability to operate within alliances exceeds the ability of any single individual, no matter how strong, to dominate others. If the dominant tries, he (assuming 'he' for the moment) will meet an alliance in resistance who together can deal with him. Once that point is reached, the sensible strategy becomes not to try to dominate others, but to use alliances to resist being dominated oneself. This was termed 'counterdominance' by Erdal and Whiten, and they used it to describe what is found regularly in African hunter-gatherer societies, so-called demand-sharing, an attitude of 'don't mess with me', humour as a levelling device, and the impossibility of coercion since no particular individual is in charge. They saw counterdominance as fundamental to the evolution of human psychology, with competing tendencies for individuals to try to get away with bigger shares where opportunity presents, but, faced with demands from others, to give in and settle for equal shares.

Whiten and Erdal focused on food-sharing as the most visible aspect of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism. But how does sex fit into this model? Whiten and Erdal noted the hunter-gatherer tendency for monogamy, or serial monogamy, which contrasts with polygyny among propertied farmers and herders. But again we need to go to our biology to see the underlying features of our reproductive physiology that lead to reproductive egalitarianism – the most significant form of egalitarianism from an evolutionary perspective. Women have evolved a sexual physiology which can be described as levelling and time-wasting... For a dominant male trying to manage a harem of females this is disastrous.

Women have evolved a sexual physiology which can be described as levelling and time-wasting. Why? Because if a hominin female really needs extra energy for her hungry offspring, better to give reproductive rewards to males who will hang around and do something useful for those offspring. Our reproductive signals make life hard for males who want to identify fertile females, monopolise the fertile moment and then move on to the next one (a classic strategy for dominant male apes). We have concealed and unpredictable ovulation. A man cannot reliably tell when his partner is ovulating. Also, women are sexually receptive, potentially, for virtually all of their

cycle, a much larger proportion than any other primate. The combined effect is to scramble the information for males about exactly when a female is fertile.

For a dominant male trying to manage a harem of females this is disastrous. While he is guessing about the possible fertility of one cycling female, he has to stay with her, and is missing other opportunities. Meanwhile, other males will be attending to those other sexually receptive females. Continuous sexual receptivity spreads the reproductive opportunities around many males, hence is levelling from an evolutionary perspective.

BaYaka women of the Congo forest have a slogan perfectly expressing their resistance to male philandering: ‘One woman, one penis!’ This serves as their ritual rallying cry against any attempt by a man to form a harem. Basically, hunter-gatherer women demand one man each to support their energy requirements and investment in costly offspring.

In farming and herding societies, some men can muster resources, large livestock or land, enabling them to acquire more than one wife, those wives and their children then forming the patriarch’s labour force. This automatically means other men go without reproductive opportunities. But for immediate-return hunter-gatherers, those who consume all they hunt and gather the same day, men cannot accumulate resources and harem-holding is simply not stable.

Symbolism and language depend on egalitarianism

So far, I have claimed that these features of our biology, life history and evolved psychology provide evidence of an egalitarian past during our evolution: our large brain size, cooperative eyes, menopause, intersubjectivity and Machiavellian counter-dominance. These are underpinned by women’s evolved sexual physiology increasing equality of reproductive opportunities among men, compared with their great ape cousins.

Now I will argue that using symbols and speaking language could only have emerged on the basis of egalitarianism. Over fifty years ago, leading US anthropologist Marshall Sahlins made a revealing comparison of nonhuman primates against human hunter-gatherers. Noting egalitarianism as a key difference, he saw culture as ‘the oldest “equalizer”’. Among animals capable of symbolic communication’ he said, ‘the weak can collectively connive to overthrow the strong.’ We can reverse the arrow of causality here. Because among Machiavellian and counterdominant humans weaker individuals can connive to overthrow the strong, we are animals capable of symbolic communication.

Only in such conditions is language likely to emerge. The strong have no need of words; they have more direct physical means of persuasion. Here, listen to Graeber, discussing the ignorance and lack of imagination of those in power in state administration. His words apply very well to the evolutionary origins of language as the essence of human creativity:

If you have the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on, and therefore, generally speaking, you don't. Hence the sure-fire way to simplify social arrangements, to ignore the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings that human life is really made of, is to make a rule and threaten to attack anyone who breaks it.

Language as the mutual exploration of each other's minds – 'the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings' as Graeber has it – requires nonviolent safe space and time to be able to work. Conversation as a necessarily consensual process expresses the quintessential opposite of the relations of dominance applied by the big stick. It relies on the ultimate intersubjective ability to look through the eyes of the other. A fundamentally egalitarian matrix is the only possible ground for the evolution of language.

With his anarchist instincts, Graeber associates arbitrary rules with the power of the bureaucratic and bullying state which has no interest in what its subjects actually think since it can apply violence with impunity. But the first rules ever invented by human beings surely did not come from the minds of dominant individuals. The powerful need only operate by the maxim of 'might is right'. The first rules ever invented by human beings surely did not come from the minds of dominant individuals.

Rules and taboos observed in hunter-gatherer communities where there is no possibility of coercion follow another dynamic. At first glance, they may appear as random collections of weird customs with no particular logic. Take for example the concept of *ekila* among the BaYaka. This is an ancient idea found across the Congo basin among diverse groups of forest hunter-gatherers. Untranslatable, it encompasses food taboos, hunting luck, respect for animals, menstrual blood, fertility and the moon. For anthropologist Jerome Lewis, *ekila* provides a trail of breadcrumbs for any individual as they grow up, teaching them how to 'do' their culture.

This is thoroughly egalitarian because the authority for these rules does not rest with any single influential person, but with the forest itself. The axiom of *ekila* is proper sharing, interdependency and respect, between those of a different age or sex, between humans and animals. Then the forest provides. We can tell that this was not dreamed up by some dominant male because for a man to maintain his *ekila* (roughly, his hunting luck), he should not have sex before a hunt. A woman preserves her potency or *ekila* when she goes to the moon, that is menstruates. All those in her hut must follow the same observances and taboos.

Ekila is an ancient, self-organising system of law that may echo the big bang of earliest human culture. It really represents what I claim is the original rule, the rule against rape, 'No means NO', a woman's body is sacred if she says so. And here is my story about how that rule arose in the first place.



Red ochre from the southern African Middle Stone Age which has been rubbed and striated to produce pigments for body art. Ian Watts. All rights reserved.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was NO!

Women's bodies evolved over a million years to favour the 'one woman, one penis' principle, rewarding males who were willing to share and invest over those who competed for extra females, at the expense of investment. But as we became more Machiavellian in our strategies, so did would-be alpha males. The final steep rise in brain size up to the emergence of modern humans likely reflects an arms race of Machiavellian strategies between the sexes. The final steep rise in brain size up to the emergence of modern humans probably reflects an arms race of Machiavellian strategies between the sexes.

As brain sizes increased, mothers needed more regular and reliable contributions from male partners. In African hunter-gatherers this has become a fixed pattern known by anthropologists as 'bride-service'. A man's sexual access depends on his success in provisioning and surrendering on demand any game or honey he gets to the family of his bride – mainly his mother-in-law who is effectively his boss. Where women are living with their mothers, this makes it almost impossible for a man to dominate by controlling distribution of food.

The problem for early modern human females as they came under the maximum stress of increased brain size would be with males who tried to get away with sex without bride-service. To deal with this threat, mothers of costly offspring extended their alliances to include just about everyone against the potential alpha. Men who were relatives of mothers (brothers or mother's brothers) would support those females. In addition, men who willingly invested in offspring would have interests directly opposed to the would-be alpha, who undermined their reproductive efforts. This pits a whole community as a coalition against a would-be dominant individual. Evolutionary anthropologist Christopher Boehm describes this as 'reverse-dominance', a political dynamic that for the first time established a morally regulated community.

So the occasion for reverse-dominant, collective – *moral* – action happens whenever a prospective alpha male tries to abduct a potentially fertile female. Can we describe this in more detail in terms of actual behaviour?

The alpha male strategy is to find and mate with a fertile female, before moving on to the next one. But how does a male identify fertile females, considering that in human evolution ovulation became progressively concealed? One cue to the human reproductive cycle could not be so easily hidden: menstruation. With no sign for ovulation, menstruation became a highly salient cue to males that a female was near fertility.

For an alpha male, a menstruating female is the obvious target. Guard her and have sex with her until she is pregnant. Then, look for the next one. In nomadic hunter-gatherer camps, women of reproductive age are pregnant or nursing much of the time, making menstruation a relatively rare event. Undermining cooperative childcare, menstruation threatens to trigger male competition for access to an imminently fertile

female, and also competition among females, because a pregnant or nursing mother risks losing male support to a cycling female.

Mothers have two possible responses to this problem. Following the logic of concealed ovulation, they might try to hide the menstruant's condition so that males would not know. But because the signal has potential economic value by attracting male attention, females should do the opposite: make a big display advertising imminent fertility. Whenever a coalition member menstruated, the whole coalition joined that female in amplifying her signal to attract males. Females within coalitions would begin to use blood-coloured substances as cosmetics to augment their signals. This is the Female Cosmetic Coalitions model of the origins of art and symbolic culture. This is the Female Cosmetic Coalitions model of the origins of art and symbolic culture.

In creating a cosmetic coalition in resistance, females deter alpha males by surrounding a menstrual female and refusing to let anyone near. They are creating the world's first taboo, on menstrual blood or collectively imagined blood, speaking the world's first word: NO!

But even as a negative, this cosmetic display encourages investor males who are willing to go hunting and bring back supplies to the whole female coalition. Cosmetically decorated females who create a big show of solidarity against alpha males ensure that investor males will get the fitness rewards. It is fully in the interests of investor males to sexually select females belonging to ritual cosmetic coalitions, because they then eliminate competition from the would-be alphas.

The Female Cosmetic Coalition (FCC) model shows us the prototype of a moral order, upheld through those puberty rituals, taboos, and prohibitions that surround menstruation in so many ethnographic accounts. *Ekila*, discussed above, is a classic example.

The FCC strategy is also the prototype symbolic action, with collective agreement that fake or imaginary 'blood' stands for real blood. While it is *revolutionary* at the level of morality, symbolism and economics, the strategy emerges as an *evolutionary* adaptation, driven by male sexual selection of female ritual participants. On this basis, through reverse gender dominance, the hunter-gatherer institution of bride-service emerges, with roughly equal chances of reproductive success for all hunters.

Finally, the FCC model explains what we find as the earliest symbolic material in the archaeological record. When the theory was first advanced in the mid-1990s, it predicted that the world's first symbolic media would consist of blood-red cosmetics. It predicted where and when we should find them: in Africa, preceding and during our speciation, in relation to the increases of brain size. This points to a pigment record from 6-700,000 years ago and especially with the rapid growth of brains in the last 300,000 years.

These theoretical predictions have been strikingly confirmed. Pervading the record of the African Middle Stone Age are blood-red iron oxides, red ochres. These pigments are the first durable materials to be mined, processed, curated and used in design. They date back at least 300,000 years in the East and southern African record, possibly as

old as half a million years. From the time of modern humans they are found in every southern African site and rock shelter. They become the hallmark of modern humans as they move out of Africa around the world, found in copious quantities in both the Upper Palaeolithic of Europe, and in Australia from the first entry of modern humans to those continents.

Gender ambiguity at the core of the earliest religious ideas

As we know in the era of #metoo, men find it hard to hear women say NO. With that sexual physiology designed by evolution to keep men interested on a fairly continuous basis, women have to work hard to override their signals of attraction. And if they want men to go away and get on with some hunting, they will have to work very hard indeed.

Whispering ‘not right now, darling’ won’t work. They need noise, rude songs, militant dance formations to get men’s attention: ritual. But the clincher is a symbolic overturning of reality. If men are looking for a mate who is female of the right species then change that, collectively act out “We’re actually males, and not even human but animal!” Signal ‘Wrong sex, Wrong species, wrong time’. Be a red ochre body-painted coalition pantomiming the rutting behaviour of the animals you want men to hunt.

Now we can see why hunter-gatherer puberty rituals take the forms they do. The Kalahari Eland bull dance is one of the world’s oldest living rituals. Women of the camp flash naked buttocks as they dance in playful imitation of mating antelopes. Men can watch but not approach close to the menstrual girl’s seclusion hut. She is identified as the Eland Bull, with whom the women pantomime mating.

In the Hadza *maitoko* ceremony, girls dress as hunters, acting out the story of the matriarch who hunted zebra and tied their penises onto herself. What first appears inexplicable now makes perfect sense as women’s supernatural construction of taboo – ‘wrong sex, wrong species’. This is showing us what the first religious concepts looked like.

Gender egalitarianism made us human: the untold secret

Even if you don’t believe this particular story and want to work out another explanation for the red ochre and the origin of the supernatural, the biological and psychological evidence that our ancestors went through a prolonged phase of egalitarianism remains. Without that, we would not be here as language-speaking modern humans. We might have evolved into a smaller-brained hominin with rounder-shaped

eyes, using primate-style gesture/call systems of communication, and the planet would look like a very different place.

Does all this matter? Does it matter that women, organizing as the revolutionary sex, bust through the 'gray ceiling' of brain size? That female political strategies created human symbolic culture? That resistance is at the core of being human? Should we be telling our children the story of our Paleolithic heritage of gender equality – the untold secret – and how it gave our African ancestors an extraordinary future? If we want that future stretching ahead of us as far as it stretches back into our hunter-gatherer past, I think it does.

The Ted K Archive

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