



To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves.

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2014 : WHAT SCIENTIFIC IDEA IS READY FOR RETIREMENT?

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Culture

Years ago, when I sat at the feet of the master, the King of the Amazon Jungle liked to talk about culture. He quoted his own teachers, who considered it *sui generis*: culture was a thing in and of itself. It made us more than the sum of our biological parts; it emancipated us from the Promethean bonds of our evolutionary past. It set us apart from other animals, and made us special.

Napoleon Chagnon wasn't so sure about that, and neither was I.

What if the 100,000-odd year-old evidence of human social life—from the arrowheads in South Africa, to the Venus figurines at Dordogne—is the effect of nothing, more or less, but our efforts to become parents? What if the 10,000-odd year-old record of civilization—from the tax accounts at temples in the Near East, to the inscription on a bronze statue in New York Harbor—is the product of nothing, more or less, but our struggle for genetic representation in future generations?

Either case can be made. For 100,000 years or more, prehistoric foragers probably lived like contemporary foragers in Africa, or Amazonia. They probably did their best to live in peace, but occasionally fought over the means of production and reproduction—so that the winners cohabited with more women, and supported more children. And they probably were more likely to fight where it was harder to flee—on territories where resources were easy to come by, and food and shelter on nearby territories were relatively scarce.

Then, within just the last 10,000 years, the first civilizations were built. From Mesopotamia to Egypt, from India to China, then in Greece and Rome, eusocial emperors—like eusocial insects—turned some of their subordinates into sterile castes, but were extraordinarily fertile themselves. A *praepositus saacri cubiculi*, or eunuch set over the sacred bedchamber, eventually ran the empire on the Tiber; and other eunuchs collected revenues, led armies, and kept track of the hundreds of "homeborn" children in the *Familia Caesaris*—the imperial family in Rome. Then the barbarians invaded, and the emperor took his slave harem off to a secure spot on the Bosporus.

And the Republic of St Peter took over in the depopulated west. From Clovis' kingdom in Paris, to Charlemagne's empire at Aachen, to the Holy Roman conglomerate east of the Rhine, cooperatively breeding aristocrats—like cooperatively breeding birds—turned some of their sons and daughters into celibates, but raised others to become husbands and wives. Abbesses, abbots and bishops administered estates and conscripted troops, or instructed their nieces and nephews in monastery schools; and their older brothers begot heirs to their enormous castles, or covered the countryside with bastards. Then the Crusaders took ships to the Near East, and Columbus led the first waves of immigrants across the Atlantic.

Over the next few centuries, hordes of poor, huddled masses from across the Old World found places to breathe free on the American Continents. Millions of solitary slaves and serfs, and thousands of unmarried priests and monks—like helper birds, or social insect workers, whose habitats had opened up—walked away from their lords and masters, and out of their cathedrals and abbeys. They were hoping to secure liberty for themselves *and their posterity*; they were looking places to raise their own families. In the *Common Sense* words of a common man, Tom Paine: "Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. —Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

Since those early days, when I learned from Napoleon Chagnon, it's seemed to me that CULTURE is a 7-letter word for GOD. Good people—some of the best, and intelligent people—some of the smartest, have found meaning in religion: they have faith that something supernatural guides what we do. Other good, intelligent people have found meaning in culture: they believe that something superzoological shapes the course of human events. Their voices are often beautiful; and it's wonderful to be part of a chorus. But in the end, I don't get it. For me, the laws that apply to animals apply to us.

And in that view of life, there is grandeur enough.

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