

Social Evolution: Successes and Failures of Cooperation

(an alternative title: Social Evolution: the checkered history of human cooperation)

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Main themes

Kinship, family, morality, religion, the state, the market system, science are social inventions. They are institutions formed by collective trial and error, without design and purpose, over many generations, in many social milieus. Institutions define rights, obligations and beliefs that guide cooperation and manage conflict in a group. Social and cultural evolution enables cooperation and conflict management among distant, diverse, and large populations, yet the human record of successes is punctuated by failures that are not solved with technological fixes and conventional wisdom about institutional change.

Unlike the accumulation of technologies, the cultural toolkit of mankind has little changed in recorded history. The moral sense grew out of cooperation in small face-to-face, homogeneous groups. Its building blocs are reciprocity, trust, fairness, and more broadly shared understandings, social bonding, and pro-social morality. At the same time, moral virtues like solidarity and loyalty were mobilized for aggression and violence against out-groups. As more complex modes of human interdependence developed, the moral foundations of cooperation have been weakened by the diffusion of personal responsibility, moral hazard, persistence of “tribal” loyalties, false beliefs and ideologies, and other sources. Institutions meant for well being and security can foster predatory and destructive behaviors. New problems of cooperation in complex social organizations keep arising: democratic governance in multiethnic societies, responsibility for the well-being of huge elderly populations, destructive environmental impacts of technologies, the unanticipated effects of the global marketplace and international migration.

The core of the book is about how institutions succeed in achieving cooperation and managing conflict, the reasons for and consequences of failures, and measures to cope with them. The author avoids ad hoc explanations, sweeping generalizations (globalization, modernization, differentiation), and jargon. He uses causal mechanisms and explanations from the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political economy, psychology, game theory): theories and models about cooperation, agency, collective action, social dilemmas, social validation of belief systems, social construction of identities and frames, networks of linking and of bridging capital. Detailed case studies

and systematic comparisons based on historical events and particular instances of institutions and institutional change, drawn from all social science disciplines and from history and contemporary events, will explain the models and mechanisms, and how to apply them. Each chapter focuses on an institution and covers key ideas, mechanisms, and case studies. Each chapter picks out a few central issues bearing on cooperation and conflict. The chapters are not meant to provide a superficial “history” of the institution.

About the author

Anthony Oberschall was educated at Harvard and earned a PhD in sociology at Columbia in 1962. He has taught at UCLA, Yale and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he is now emeritus professor. He has taught and researched in East and Central Africa, the People’s Republic of China, Germany, France, Hungary, Bosnia and Northern Ireland. He has been a Guggenheim fellow and a New Century Scholar in the Fulbright Program. He has written six books and over a hundred publications. Among the books are Social Conflict and Social Movements (1973), Social Movements. Ideologies, Interests and Identities (1993) and his latest book Conflict and Peace Building in Divided Societies. Responses to Ethnic Violence, 2007, Routledge.

Outline of chapters

Chapter 1 accounts for *Cooperation and Conflict* in the state of nature when there is no governance for rule making and enforcement. It examines rules, behaviors and understandings that humans share (our common humanity), the formation of groups, rules for internal order, group boundaries, relations between groups, and how cooperation and conflict management are achieved both within and between groups. There are two case studies. 1. The eighteenth century encounters between European explorers and South Pacific islanders who were strangers to one another and interacted by and large peacefully to mutual benefit. 2. How the miners in the California gold rush of 1849 organized governance on their own in several hundred mining camps. Chapter completed.

Chapter 2 on *Kinship and Family* explains why humans, unlike primates, invented family, marriage, and social fatherhood, all of which increased reproductive capacity, economic security and investment in human and moral capital of children. Descent and exogamy enabled larger groups to form and to cooperate beyond small localities. The family adapted to many different social milieus and proved to be robust and resilient. Three cases are discussed. 1. How the family of the Roman world and of Nordic invaders adapted to Christianity 2. How the Chinese family in the twentieth century withstood poverty, war, civil war, the Maoist revolution, and the one child family policy. 3. The future of the family, its responses to threats from affluence in an affluent society, and to the prospect of genetic engineering. Chapter completed.

Chapter 3. *Morality* is a social invention for cooperation when relations based on interest fail due to uncertainty, opportunism, asymmetric information, and other sources of vulnerability. The origins of the moral sense and moral virtues are traced to the family as a sharing group with permanent members. The impact of religion and the state on

morality are examined. Issues of cooperation, fairness and responsibility in complex societies are analyzed, and the moral, legal and political modes of conflict management for dealing with them. Two case studies illustrate the analysis: 1. Ethnic cleansing in Prijedor during the Bosnian war, and 2. Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe. Two topics close the chapter: 1. what sort of morality is suitable for cooperation in a multi-ethnic, plural society, and 2. what happens to the moral sense and moral codes when the family weakens. In draft.

Chapter 4. *Social Hierarchy* develops the consequences of positional competition for scarce values such as leadership, social rank, prestige and orderings of performance (sports, artistic, educational, scientific) when one's gains create a loss to a rival. The dynamics of positional competition are compared to other forms of competition where the pie is increased and benefits many. Two types of status systems based on positional competition are assessed: when one rises by giving away goods to the public, as in ancient Rome, and when one creates sharp boundaries that block the rise of others, as in the Hindu caste system. In draft.

Chapter 5. *Religion*. The central issue is why there are religions at all, and why some religions succeed better than others. Interest theory, anxiety relief and cognitive agency explanations are discussed. Three case studies are provided: 1. why and how Christianity prevailed over paganism in the ancient world 2. The witch craze in seventeenth century Europe and its demise 3. A comparison of the fading of Puritanism after its first decades in New England with the success of Mormonism in Utah. In draft.

The final three chapters on the *State*, the *Market Economy*, and *Science* are in preparation. The book ends with a summary chapter and the application of the author's ideas on cooperation and conflict management to peace building and international conflict management and to institutions for the collective management of the planet that mankind inhabits.

Outstanding Features

1. The intellectual story of human cooperation and the social invention of institutions that make cooperation and conflict management possible – that is what “social evolution” means – is just about the most fascinating social science enterprise of the past two decades. Evolutionary psychology, evolutionary anthropology, moral philosophy, game theory, sociobiology, and related disciplines are vibrant. Douglass North won the Nobel Prize in economics for his work on cooperation and economic institutions. The current (Robert Axelrod) and a past (Eleanor Ostrom) president of the American Political Science Association are noted contributors to cooperation theory in their disciplines. My book will join sociology to this growing enterprise.

2. Having taught parts of this story in two freshman seminars, and three times in an upper division course on social change, I can vouch from personal experience that the topic and the issues fully engage the students, in contrast to required courses they find boring. In fact, there is a large adult public that is attracted and attentive to the topic, and The

Atlantic, The New Yorker, the Tuesday “Science” section of the New York Times, among others, regularly update their readers about the developments and controversies in evolutionary theory. There are many websites on which various aspects of evolutionary theory are monitored and debated.

3. I write without use of jargon, in plain English. The focus is on causal mechanisms and explanation, not on terminology and description. My thinking avoids political correctness and ideology. I concentrate on real events and empirical findings. Some of them I have studied myself; others I derive from the research literature.

4. Every chapter has interesting and compelling case studies developed at some length: cooperation between European explorers and South Pacific islanders in the 18th century at their first encounters; how the Puritans and Mormons created new societies in America; how the Forty-niners organized mining camps in 1849 California; the witch craze in 17th century Europe; why and how Christianity prevailed against pagan religions in Roman times; how the cause of cholera was identified in mid-nineteenth century London; how collective farms were organized in communist Eastern Europe and how farming was privatized after communism; the ethnic cleansing of a Bosnian district during the Bosnian war; how peace was established in Northern Ireland after forty years of insurrection and terrorism. These instances of both successful and unsuccessful cooperation, conflict management and institution building are integrated into the narrative of social evolution. My students not only found these cases fascinating, but wrote term papers on these and related topics. I have lectured and presented some of these cases to both scholarly and general audiences, and they never failed to hold attention and generate discussion.

5. Every chapter has a concise summary and an indication of how the subsequent chapter builds on it and how it fits into the overall narrative.

Marketing issues

The book is a monograph and would be a main text in some college courses.

1. College courses: on social change, social theory, macrosociology, modernization and development, introductory sociology that focuses on the above themes.

A very successful text has been Gerhard Lenski Human Societies: an Introduction to Macrosociology, first 1974 and several new editions (the most recent done by Patrick Nolan). Lenski puts the accent on technological progress, new energy sources, and especially the application of knowledge which enable humans to move through stages from hunters and gatherers to simple agriculture and so on to industrial society. Moral development remains at the margins, and the successes and failures of cooperation in a complex contemporary world is not his theme. I do share with Lenski a long term historical perspective and the comparative method. We both draw cases and empirical data from all the social science disciplines and history.

Daniel Chirot wrote a concise, clear text titled Social Change in the Modern Era, 1986, which I assigned in an upper division social change course. It focuses on political and economic change in the modern and contemporary world. I analyze morality, cooperation and conflict on a wider scale, and its manifestations in the family, religion, science and social hierarchies, not just the state and the economy. We overlap on ethnic, national, and international conflicts and conflict management.

A few texts come to the topic from world-systems theory (T.R. Shannon, An Introduction to the World System Perspective, 1996). World Systems focuses on failures rather than successes of cooperation: domination, exploitation, imperialism. My analysis and findings on cooperation and morality challenge the world system view and explanation of social change. There are also paperbacks popularizing the sociobiological approach (e.g., David Barash, The Whisperings Within. Evolution and the Origin of Human Nature, 1979, and Matt Ridley, The Origins of Virtue, 1998). They are strong on ants, dolphins and primates, and although suggestive about human cooperation and morality, provide little by way of evidence beyond anecdotes.

2. Monographs

Robert Axelrod, The Evolution of Cooperation, 1984, (which I analyze in my chapter 1), has been enormously successful and is a fascinating story of a social science research program. It is based almost entirely on computer simulations and experiments of interpersonal transactions in the Prisoner's Dilemma paradigm. It has limited real world data on cooperation and conflict management within and between groups and on how institutions form, which are the strength of my book.

James Q. Wilson, The Moral Sense, 1993, has chapters on fairness, duty, family and morality, etc., which are also among my topics. He writes in the introduction "This book is not, for the most part, about laws, institutions and policies. It is about human nature." My book is about institutions, or, more precisely, how human nature and institutions interact in causing success and failure for cooperation and for conflict management.

A number of books in political science, moral philosophy, anthropology and psychology (e.g., Ullman-Margalit, Eleanor Ostrom, Robyn Dawes, Marshall Sahlins) also deal with cooperation, trust, altruism, and conflict management in ways that bear some similarity to my approach. Economic historians (Douglass North, Eric Jones) specialize in institutional analysis of the political economy and its links to economic performance and change. I am inspired by these works and have learned a lot from them. My book deals with cooperation and conflict management across all major institutions as an interlinked process for explaining the successes and failures of social evolution.

Length and status of the book

I estimate about 250 pages in a printed book, to be completed March/April 2008.

