

The biology of dying democracies

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A remarkable picturing of history: From the ancient notion of gradual decline of humanity from the idyllic Golden Age, to Karl Marx's claim in 1859 that humanity was "closing its prehistory" and ready to start its true history by establishing communism, through the conclusion in 1989 by Francis Fukuyama that the collapse of communism heralded "the end of history" with the "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government", up to the worry of the American political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in 2018 that "democracies die". Countless publicists, philosophers and cultural scientists furnish a plethora of explanation of the present-day human condition, often designated as the "crisis of humanity".

A cause of the crisis may reside in biology. Humans as a biological species were selected to survive in the environment of evolutionary adaptiveness (EEA) of the pleistocene epoch (2.6 million to 12 thousand years B.C.) to solve problems that our ancestors faced as hunters and gatherers [1]. Human nature, including one of its species-specific traits, the capacity for artefaction, was essentially moulded in this epoch. Artefacts, first material, and later complemented by symbolic ones, gave birth to human culture. In the post-pleistocene time, the dynamics of artefacts was successively placing our species into novel artificial environments, distinct from the EEA and ever more complex.

By culture, humans have not become "denatured", but "upnatured". Material artefacts have enforced increase in size of human groups and brought about cities, commerce, market, states, science and technology. The social mammals, selected to thrive in small antagonistic groups, progressed to living in large groups composed of millions of anonymous individuals, incessantly collaborating and communicating. Symbolic artefacts have made humans "symbolizing animals". According to psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the symbolic activity produces „fundamentally new forms of behaviour". Still, the genome of the species, and thus human nature inscribed in it, has remained unchanged.

How could this be achieved? In the 18th century, philosophers of the Enlightenment of continental Europe, enchanted by the glory of science, ascribed this ascent of humankind to the power of human reason. Some of them even professed boundless perfectibility of humans. At the same time, in America the Founding Fathers of the U.S. also believed that people are rational and capable of solving problems with reason. However, affected by the puritan tradition of Calvinism, they were aware of fallibility due to "original sin" in all humans – an expression of the tendency to do wrong things even if knowing what may be right – and the necessity to master it by a proper governance. The best solution for creating a just society was to institute democracy as a system of check and balances that enable the government to control the governed and oblige it to control itself. Numerous feedbacks would stabilize the system.

If humans did reveal laws of Nature and exploit them to ease human life, Karl Marx, inspired by the Age of Enlightenment, attempted "to lay bare the economic law of motion of society" – for him apparently similar to Newton's laws of motion in inanimate Nature – and to applied it to "scientific management of society". Marxist communism became a gigantic experiment in the 20th century to test the European rationalism. The experiment failed. "By reducing cultural polymorphism and destroying evolutionary arisen institutions, communism peeled off cultural layers and denuded humans to their biological core /.../ – some universal

features of human nature, its primordials, have been ‘squeezed out’ and have come to the fore: Humans are mythophilic, group-confined, fearful and hyperemotional animals. /.../ Instead of achieving rational institutions, spontaneous dynamics of society under communism gave rise to institutions that, by their irrationality, had no precedent in history. A political and economic system arose lacking virtually any feedback” [2].

The failure of communism has falsified the hypothesis that humans are rational animals. The conclusion concurred with the then “affective revolution” in cognitive sciences, which proclaimed that emotions are inseparable from cognition or even central part of it. Humans in their acting and judging are not rational, but rather rationalizing, backed by emotions and amply taking recourse to myths. Rationalization serves to account for the success of the American type of democracy, which has become the universal paragon of democracy, gradually expanding throughout the globe.

Emotions have been a substantial driver of human culture. Emotions, defined as the singular normative device that attributes meaning to things and actions in the world, are a universal characteristic of life, and thus a well-founded subject for study by biology. However, biology, and “hard” natural sciences in general, if focusing their attention on culture and its dynamics, may open an innovative view on the subject, quite distinct from that provided so far exclusively by another, “soft”, domain of scientific endeavour, cultural sciences (the ensemble of traditional human and social sciences).

Primitive human beings, insecure, full of fear, scared by threats and assaults of unknown Nature, had personalized natural forces, deified them and bowed to them with awe and submission. As culture was progressing and natural forces were complemented by social ones, negative emotions of fear and uncertainty pushed people to organize into large cohesive and stratified groups, in which analogous awe and devotion was exercised by subordinate members towards leaders – indeed, the power and orders of the rulers had been taken as sacred and was deified, too. Artefacts of culture have evolved to reduce negative emotions and have provoked hypertrophy of positive emotions by creating and promoting artificial needs, in particular an incessant search for pleasure.

Humans are controversial beings, an inconsistent mixture of nature and culture, dominated by both. Biological hominization was followed by cultural humanization. So far, biologists mostly tended to conceive the biological individual as a Darwinian unit communicating with another individual in interest of one’s own Darwinian fitness. Signals should serve to modify the behaviour of the receiver to benefit the signaller. In a “selfish gene” view of Richard Dawkins, it would be in genes’ interests of the signaller to give dishonest signals. It might then be appropriate to consider human culture in its entirety as a colossal cheating. Cheating on Nature; cheating a human individual on another individual; cheating in commerce and politics. It has been also assumed that culture has amplified human capacity of self-deception. According to biologist Robert Trivers, self-deception evolved in the service of deceit and its major function was to better deceive others.

How then to explain the fact that culture has raised human animals from their “natural state” of life in the African savannah up to the level of civilized human beings, cultivated by education, capable of self-transcendence and even willing to sacrifice one’s own life for an idea? Seeing through the lenses of biology, we must assume that humans live in two disparate worlds: real and symbolic (or, spiritual), and that a culture functions as a superior Darwinian individual. The real evolutionary arisen institutions, morals, religion, political organizations, law, trade, rites and customs have their symbolic, spiritual part. It is this part that carries benefits known under the name “social capital” and constitutes the very groundwork of human society. Our limited rationalizing capacity does not allow us to fully understand and describe these spiritual components, and therefore they were named the “metaconceptual foundations of society”. But the term “spiritual foundations of society” (SFS) may be a more

proper characteristic. The importance of the SFS to maintain the social edifice functioning and stable may be the principal insight of the biology of culture. We might have not been aware of them as long as society was running smoothly.

In our days, the SFS are worldwide getting loose and slowly disintegrating. The consequence is increasing instability of the existing social systems, including democracy. According to the dictum of the German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde from 1976, „the liberal secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself.“ Paradoxically, science, an essential part of culture, may now be the main causing factor of this destabilization: by demythization of the human fate and its inconsistency and contradiction; and by unstoppable secularization. In addition, science, and its step-child, technology, accelerate the dynamics of society and augment the complexity of the world.

Democracy, with its “wisdom of the crowd”, did function well when the frequency and complexity of events were rather low, the society relatively simple and human knowledge scant and limited. Nowadays, in the world, which has got the designation “post-truth world”, with the shaky and decomposing SFS, deceptions to public and fake-news have become commonplace and self-deception of many politicians is turning into sheer hypocrisy. Combined with the vagaries of economy and growing international tensions, common people are losing feeling of security, resort to their herd identity and to loyalty for strong self-assured leaders. Such leaders, once democratically elected, might use the means offered by new technologies to transform liberal democracy into its illiberal caricature, euphemistically labelled „directed“ or „managed“ democracy. The “immanent” fears from job uncertainties, dominance of artificial intelligence and robotization, climate changes and migration explosion have replaced the traditional fears from God and eternal punishment, from state authority and social ostracism. Secular humanism of a minority of magnanimous individuals may not be a universal remedy against a “denatured religion”: sneaking cynicism.

Violently enforced destruction of the SFS was one of the reasons why the communist system had fallen apart. History does not recur, but the lesson of communism remains as a warning: human nature does not change. We continue to carry the potentials for good and evil that have been implanted into our genome in the savannah. The prospect of humanity is precarious: we have no idea how to stop the weakening and disintegration of the current SFS and to find adequate substitutions.

References

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