

in human cultures but “often dismiss the uncomfortable ‘exceptions’ as temporary and unimportant aberrations.” This is surprising, for if you believe that “repeated, often genocidal warfare has shaped our genetic destiny, the existence of nonaggressive peoples is embarrassing.” (Gould, *Ever Since Darwin*)

Like the social Darwinism that preceded it, sociobiology proceeds by first projecting the dominant ideas of current society onto nature (often unconsciously, so that scientists mistakenly consider the ideas in question as both “normal” and “natural”). Bookchin refers to this as “the subtle projection of historically conditioned human values” onto nature rather than “scientific objectivity.” Then the theories of nature produced in this manner are transferred *back* onto society and history, being used to “prove” that the principles of capitalism (hierarchy, authority, competition, etc.) are eternal *laws*, which are then appealed to as a justification for the status quo! “What this procedure does accomplish,” notes Bookchin, “is to reinforce human social hierarchies by justifying the command of men and women as innate features of the ‘natural order.’ Human domination is thereby transcribed into the genetic code as biologically immutable.” (Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*) Amazingly, there are many supposedly intelligent people who take this sleight-of-hand seriously.

This can be seen when “hierarchies” in nature are used to explain, and so justify, hierarchies in human societies. Such analogies are misleading for they forget the institutional nature of human life. As Murray Bookchin notes in his critique of sociobiology, a “weak, enfeebled, unnerved, and sick ape is hardly likely to become an ‘alpha’ male, much less retain this highly ephemeral ‘status.’ By contrast, the most physically and mentally pathological human rulers have exercised authority with devastating effect in the course of history.” This “expresses a power of hierarchical *institutions* over persons that is completely reversed in so-called ‘animal hierarchies’ where the absence of institutions is precisely the only intelligible way of talking about ‘alpha males’ or ‘queen bees.’” (Bookchin, “Sociobiology or Social Ecology”) Thus what makes human society unique is conveniently ignored and the real sources of power in society are hidden under a genetic screen.

The sort of apologetics associated with appeals to “human nature” (or sociobiology at its worse) are natural, of course, because every ruling class needs to justify their right to rule. Hence they support doctrines that defined the latter in ways appearing to justify elite power—be it sociobiology, divine right, original sin, etc. Obviously, such doctrines have always been wrong...until now, of course, as it is obvious our current society truly conforms to “human nature” and it has been scientifically proven by our current scientific priesthood[!]

The arrogance of this claim is truly amazing. History hasn’t stopped. One thousand years from now, society will be completely different from what it is presently or

from what anyone has imagined. No government in place at the moment will still be around, and the current economic system will not exist. The only thing that may remain the same is that people will still be claiming that their new society is the “One True System” that completely conforms to human nature, even though all past systems did not.

Of course, it does not cross the minds of supporters of capitalism that people from different cultures may draw different conclusions from the same facts—conclusions that may be *more* valid. Nor does it occur to capitalist apologists that the theories of the “objective” scientists may be framed in the context of the dominant ideas of the society in which they live. It comes as no surprise to anarchists, however, that scientists working in Tsarist Russia developed a theory of evolution based on *cooperation* within species, quite unlike their counterparts in capitalist Britain, who developed a theory based on *competitive struggle* within and between species. That the latter theory reflected the dominant political and economic theories of British society (notably competitive individualism) is pure coincidence, of course.

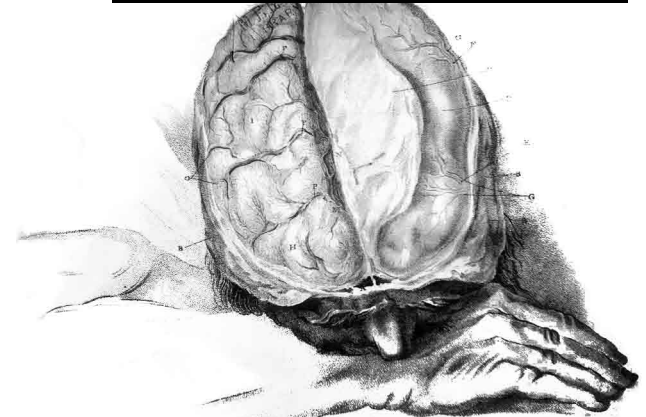
Kropotkin’s classic work *Mutual Aid*, for example, was written in response to the obvious inaccuracies that British representatives of Darwinism had projected onto nature and human life. Building upon the mainstream Russian criticism of the British Darwinism of the time, Kropotkin showed (with substantial empirical evidence) that “mutual aid” within a group or species played as important a role as “mutual struggle” between individuals within those groups or species (see Stephan Jay Gould’s essay “Kropotkin was no Crackpot” in his book *Bully for Brontosaurus* for details and an evaluation). It was, he stressed, a “factor” in evolution along with competition, a factor which, in most circumstances, was far more important to survival. Thus cooperation is just as “natural” as competition so proving that “human nature” was not a barrier to anarchism as cooperation between members of a species can be the best pathway to advantage individuals.

To conclude, anarchists argue that anarchy is not against “human nature” for two main reasons. Firstly, what is considered as being “human nature” is shaped by the society in which we live and the relationships we create. This means a hierarchical society will encourage certain personality traits to dominate while an anarchist one would encourage others. As such, anarchists “do not so much rely on the fact that human nature will change as they do upon the theory that the same nature will act differently under different circumstances.” Secondly, change “seems to be one of the fundamental laws of existence” so “who can say that man[kind] has reached the limits of [its] possibilities.” (George Barrett, *Objections to Anarchism*)



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WHAT



ABOUT



HUMAN



NATURE?

THE ANARCHIST FAQ EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

Anarchists, far from ignoring “human nature,” have the only political theory that gives this concept deep thought and reflection. Too often, “human nature” is flung up as the last line of defense in an argument against anarchism, because it is thought to be beyond reply. This is, however, not the case.

First of all, human nature is a complex thing. If, by human nature, it is meant “what humans do,” it is obvious that human nature is contradictory—love and hate, compassion and heartlessness, peace and violence, and so on, have all been expressed by people and so are all products of “human nature.” Of course, what is considered “human nature” can change with changing social circumstances. For example, slavery was considered part of “human nature” and “normal” for thousands of years. Homosexuality was considered perfectly normal by the ancient Greeks yet thousands of years later the Christian church denounced it as unnatural. War only became part of “human nature” once states developed. Hence Chomsky:

“Individuals are certainly capable of evil...But individuals are capable of all sorts of things. Human nature has lots of ways of realizing itself, humans have lots of capacities and options. Which ones reveal themselves depends to a large extent on the institutional structures. If we had institutions which permitted pathological killers free reign, they’d be running the place. The only way to survive would be to let those elements of your nature manifest themselves.

“If we have institutions which make greed the sole property of human beings and encourage pure greed at the expense of other human emotions and commitments, we’re going to have a society based on greed, with all that follows. A different society might be organized in such a way that human feelings and emotions of other sorts, say, solidarity, support, sympathy become dominant. Then you’ll have different aspects of human nature and personality revealing themselves.”

(Noam Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent*)

Therefore, environment plays an important part in defining what “human nature” is, how it develops and what of its aspects are expressed. Indeed, one of the greatest myths about anarchism is the idea that we think human nature is inherently good (rather, we think it is inherently sociable). How it develops and expresses itself is dependent on the kind of society we create and inhabit. A hierarchical society will shape people in certain (negative) ways and produce a “human nature” radically different from a libertarian one. So “when we hear men [and women] saying that Anarchists imagine men [and women] much better than they really are, we merely wonder how intelligent people can repeat that nonsense. Do we not say continually that the only means of rendering men [and women] less rapacious and egotistic, less ambitious and less slavish at the same time, is to eliminate those conditions which favor the growth of egotism and rapacity, of slavishness and ambition?” (Peter Kropotkin,

Act for Yourself)

As such, the use of “human nature” as an argument against anarchism is simply superficial and, ultimately, an evasion. It is an excuse not to think. “Every fool,” as Emma Goldman put it, “from king to policeman, from the flatheaded parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weakness of human nature. Yet how can any one speak of it today, with every soul in prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed?” Change society, create a better social environment and then we can judge what is a product of our natures and what is the product of an authoritarian system. For this reason, anarchism “stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government...Freedom, expansion, opportunity, and above all, peace and repose, alone can teach us the real dominant factors of human nature and all its wonderful possibilities.” (Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*)

This does not mean that human beings are infinitely plastic, with each individual born a tabula rasa (blank slate) waiting to be formed by “society” (which in practice means those who run it). As Noam Chomsky argues, “I don’t think its possible to give a rational account of the concept of alienated labour on that assumption [that human nature is nothing but a historical product], nor is it possible to produce something like a moral justification for the commitment to some kind of social change, except on the basis of assumptions about human nature and how modifications in the structure of society will be better able to conform to some of the fundamental needs that are part of our essential nature.” (Chomsky, *Language and Politics*) We do not wish to enter the debate about what human characteristics are and are not “innate.” All we will say is that human beings have an innate ability to think and learn—that much is obvious, we feel—and that humans are sociable creatures, needing the company of others to feel complete and to prosper. Moreover, they have the ability to recognize and oppose injustice and oppression. Bakunin rightly considered “the power to think and the desire to rebel” as “precious faculties.”

These three features, we think, suggest the viability of an anarchist society. The innate ability to think for oneself automatically makes all forms of hierarchy illegitimate, and our need for social relationships implies that we can organize without the state. The deep unhappiness and alienation afflicting modern society reveals that the centralization and authoritarianism of capitalism and the state are denying some innate needs within us. In fact, as mentioned earlier, for the great majority of its existence the human race *has* lived in anarchic communities, with little or no hierarchy. That modern society calls such people “savages” or “primitive” is pure arrogance. So who can tell whether anarchism is against “human nature?” Anarchists have accumulated much evidence to suggest that it may not be.

As for the charge that the anarchists demand too much of “human nature,” it is often *non-anarchists* who make the greatest claims on it. For “while our opponents seem to admit there is a kind of salt of the earth—the rulers, the employers, the leaders—who, happily enough, prevent those bad men—the ruled, the

exploited, the led—from becoming still worse than they are” we anarchists “maintain that *both* rulers and ruled are spoiled by authority” and “*both* exploiters and exploited are spoiled by exploitation.” So “there is [a] difference, and a very important one. We admit the imperfections of human nature, but we make no exception for the rulers. *They* make it, although sometimes unconsciously, and because we make no such exception, they say that we are dreamers.” (Kropotkin, *Op. cit.*) If human nature is so bad, then giving some people power over others and hoping this will lead to justice and freedom is hopelessly utopian.

Moreover, as noted, Anarchists argue that hierarchical organizations bring out the worst in human nature. Both the oppressor and the oppressed are negatively affected by the authoritarian relationships so produced. “It is a characteristic of privilege and of every kind of privilege,” argued Bakunin, “to kill the mind and heart of man... That is a social law which admits no exceptions...It is the law of equality and humanity.” (Bakunin, *God and the State*) And while the privileged become corrupted by power, the powerless (in general) become servile in heart and mind (luckily the human spirit is such that there will always be rebels no matter the oppression for where there is oppression, there is resistance and, consequently, hope). As such, it seems strange for anarchists to hear non-anarchists justify hierarchy in terms of the (distorted) “human nature” it produces.

Sadly, too many have done precisely this. It continues to this day. For example, with the rise of “sociobiology,” some claim (with very little real evidence) that capitalism is a product of our “nature,” which is determined by our genes. These claims are simply a new variation of the “human nature” argument and have, unsurprisingly, been leapt upon by the powers that be. Considering the dearth of evidence, their support for this “new” doctrine must be purely the result of its utility to those in power—i.e. the fact that it is useful to have an “objective” and “scientific” basis to rationalize inequalities in wealth and power (for a discussion of this process see *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature* by Steven Rose, R.C. Lewontin, and Leon J. Kamin).

This is not to say that it does not hold a grain of truth. As scientist Stephen Jay Gould notes, “the range of our potential behaviour is circumscribed by our biology” and if this is what sociobiology means “by genetic control, then we can scarcely disagree.” However, this is not what is meant. Rather, it is a form of “biological determinism” that sociobiology argues for. Saying that there are specific genes for specific human traits says little for while “violence, sexism, and general nastiness are biological since they represent one subset of a possible range of behaviours” so are “peacefulness, equality, and kindness.” And so “we may see their influence increase if we can create social structures that permit them to flourish.” That this may be the case can be seen from the works of sociobiologists themselves, who “acknowledge diversity”