

## Book Review

### Evolutionary Constraints on Democratic Nation Building

A review of *The Failure of Democratic Nation Building: Ideology Meets Evolution* by Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. 155. ISBN 1-4039-6781-4.

Hiram Caton, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Email: hcaton2@bigpond.net.

This slender book challenges the long-term commitment of the United States to promote the spread of democracy. The sharp end of the stick is the authors' challenge to the doctrine of pre-emption, announced by President George W. Bush in June 2002, according to which the United States reserves the right to intervene wherever necessary to protect national security. That objection has, since the authors wrote, become a chorus that includes some neoconservative pundits who supported the Afghanistan and Iraq interventions. What makes Albert Somit and Steven Peterson's approach special—and relevant to readers of this journal—is indicated in the subtitle. The good sense the authors would bring to remedying foundering policy is inspired by what evolutionists understand about human sociability. We share with the higher primates a strong propensity to social hierarchy and associated dominance and submission behaviors that make it difficult for human populations to transcend what they declare to be 'the default' form of government: authoritarian hierarchy.

The authors bring strong qualifications to their task. They were among those who initiated the effort to bring biological and evolutionary factors into political science. They helped establish the Association for Politics and Life Sciences and its journal, *Politics and Life Sciences* in 1980. They have edited a number of books investigating 'biopolitical' themes and wrote *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy: The Biological Basis of Authoritarianism* (1997). True to this background, *The Failure of Democratic Nation Building* is, in the first instance, a political science essay, but one arguing that our heritable behavior as social primates provides critical evidence for interpreting a major political issue—assessment of the drive for democratic nation building. Those opposed to any suggestion of natural constraints on our aspirations (most social scientists) pre-emptorily dismiss this argument: if one-fifth of humanity enjoy free government; why not the remainder? The short answer is that with the exception of republican polities in Greco-Roman antiquity, authoritarian government has prevailed everywhere until recently. Special enabling conditions are required, they argue, if democracy is to work, and, moreover, the threat of lapse into the default position is ever present.

Indeed, this threat is proverbial wisdom. Libertarians decry the curtailment of individual liberty by excessive taxation and bureaucratic interference. The equal opportunity chorus finds insidious discrimination everywhere and would liberate those oppressed by gender and racial discrimination. The conception of the public as an equilibrium of individuals each acting for his or her benefit may be apposite for markets, but it doesn't approximate the complexity of interacting hierarchical organizations—business, professional, bureaucratic, religious, ethnic—that makes things work. The authors believe that today these things are not working so well. They argue that 'the long-term prospects for democracy worldwide...would be much better served by using our human and financial resources to strengthen democracy here at home rather than by squandering them...in almost assuredly fruitless "nation building" ventures abroad. This, in essence, is the case we try to make' (p. 4).

The authors organize their evidence as follows. A chapter is devoted to discussion of heritable human sociality and its implication that culturally expanded associations, from tribal alliances to empires, are authoritarian by default. The discussion includes comment on our species' unique culture-making capacity. A chapter is devoted to the definition of democracy and establishment of a checklist for deciding at what point a nation can be said to be a free government. Another chapter expounds the enabling conditions that must be in place for democracy to be viable. It is followed by a study of the statistical data on the incidence of democracy in today's world, including assessment of America's nation building efforts, 1945-2005. The book concludes with a conspectus on America's internal problems and a plea for repudiation of the drive to reform the world's evils.

Let us first consider the exposition of human sociability with respect to dominance competition and the social hierarchy that is an interactive cause and effect of competition. Their leitmotif is inclusive fitness. Since members of a reproductive band are kin, inclusive fitness approximates group selection. This resolves the problem of the evolutionary sustainability of unequal distribution of benefits, including reproductive advantage, because down-hierarchy individuals benefit indirectly from subordination and compliance. The authors note that sociability patterns vary among social primates, and vary within particular species in different ecological settings; nevertheless, linear and coalition hierarchies endure (p. 12). Competition integrates with cooperation to produce a relatively stable group dynamics that confers benefits, albeit unequal, on all members.

Given the critical importance that the authors assign to primate sociability for the justification of their thesis, I found this discussion a little too brief. There is need for contrasting descriptions of the social behaviours of various species, for example, chimpanzees and bonobos, as well as descriptions of how behaviours of a group may change with circumstances, as Stuart and Jeanne Altmann have vividly shown of baboons in Kenya. It would also have been helpful to comment on the ingenuity, including intrigue and faking, that macaques and other primates use to possess a territory, exploit resources, trick human hosts, and one-up rivals. Acknowledgement of such labile behavior is an instructive reminder that some human leadership skills

are significantly overlapped by simians. Finally, the account would be strengthened by a discussion of the medium of primate sociability: non-verbal communication. It would be an opportunity to show readers that primates express some emotions commonly assumed to be peculiar to ourselves; and that simians and great apes are adept at communicating subtle mood variations as well as emotional states signalling significant likely behaviour, such as that associated with threat, fear, or submission.<sup>1</sup>

Social hierarchy implies status difference, subordination, conformism, and obedience. Many evolutionists have commented on these attributes and the authors assemble a repertoire of apposite quotations. But the centerpiece of their evidence is Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments, together with replications and variations on the original experimental design. In Milgram's now-classic research, experimental subjects were told that they would participate in a scientific learning experiment. Their role was to administer an electric shock to another subject situated in an adjoining room. The shocks were ostensibly calibrated up to 450 volts. The authority—a psychologist in a white coat—instructed the subject (who was given the role of 'teacher') to administer shocks to a 'student' as part of a purported learning experiment. Subjects could hear and see the student's (in reality, an actor) vocal reactions to the shock. As the supposed voltage increased and the student's pained responses grew more intense, subjects expressed their own pain through sweating, trembling, lip biting, and protesting the harm. The authority responded with instructions that the shocks must continue. Most subjects (sixty-five percent) complied even when they believed that the shocks were 'very strong' and 'intensive'. No subject abandoned the lab in protest and none reported Dr Strangelove's incitement to aggravated assault to the police.

Milgram was surprised, and dismayed, by 'the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority' (p. 19). Subjects abandoned their own principles, and acted contrary to their feelings, to comply with an authority whose sole mode of persuasion was the gravely delivered counter-factual command: 'you have no other choice, you must go on'. Somit and Peterson endorse Milgram's assessment that the experiments strongly suggest that obedience is an innate capacity, like language capacity.

Among the extensive commentary on obedience experiments was the 'Ho Hum' reaction. Yes, the design was brilliant, but the outcome only repeated what happens in everyday life (including university teaching). Willingness to submit to instructions and to authority simply express the hierarchy capability. Even termites do it. This I thought was the authors' sense, so I was surprised when they purport to discover, immediately following the obedience discussion, a 'small Darwinian window for democracy'. The window is our species' unique capacity for culture, which enables us 'in some instances...[to] triumph, at least temporarily, over nature'. By the use of discipline, indoctrination, and other formative practices, we 'often willingly undertake actions and pursue goals that may be strikingly different from those to which our evolutionary history has otherwise predisposed us' (p. 21f). Examples are asceticism, celibacy, and dedicated altruism inculcated by religions.

Other examples are the dedication and subordination inculcated by secular ideologies and charismatic leaders. Here is the window for democracy: we may escape nature—the natural impulse to authoritarian hierarchy—by effective indoctrination into the principles and practices of democracy. The authors write: ‘propaganda and indoctrination may account more plausibly for the occasional emergence of democracy than for the acceptance achieved by authoritarian beliefs and modes of rule’ (p. 22). With this statement the authors march boldly into paradox. Democratic apologists reject indoctrination as the antithesis of the self-activating individualism that they take to be the core belief and the practical engine of democracy. Authoritarian apologists, by contrast, scorn individualism as the illusionary freedom of puppets on the strings of capitalist domination, or as bourgeois decadence, or as narcissistic self-indulgence inflated by fashion. But if culture *is* an escape route from nature, why may not the species tendency to authoritarian hierarchy be overcome by all? Perhaps even ultra-sociable participatory democracy, or ultra-libertarian individualism, are possible. A beginning toward an explanation of why this is unlikely may be found in Richard Lynn and Tatu Vanhanen’s *IQ and the Wealth of Nations* (2002), which shows the strong correlation between a nation’s average IQ and its wealth accumulation.

It seems to me that in saluting the power of culture to overcome nature, and overlooking such studies as *The Bell Curve* and *IQ and the Wealth of Nations*, the authors bow to the great iconic credulity of modern culture.<sup>2</sup> It’s the very credulity assumed by the Standard Social Scientific Model. The model rejects evolutionary and biological causality because they imply heritable traits, such as sex differences, that set limits to high aspirations, such as the elimination of discrimination. However, numerous evolutionary accounts of natural hierarchy are based on male social dominance and female commitment to birthing and nurturing. Males compete because competition is invigorating (fun), because dominance status is glory (what the fun is about), and because it gives marginally (or as the case may be, prodigiously) better access to resources, leading ultimately to enhanced fitness. Since the primary social group is the reproductive group, each is (by inclusive fitness logic) in competition with other groups. This is the evolutionary basis for ethnic competition, which has sometimes been extremely destructive in the past and which continues today in many varieties, including the radical Islamic assault on Eurocentric democracy. Islamic radicalism (‘terrorism’) is consciously androcentric and hostile to western notions of gender diversity. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ostentatiously condemns western liberalism, and only two of some fifty Muslim nations are democratic.

I put these jarring contrasts on the table because the authors avoid them, presumably as a concession to political science colleagues. I doubt that will work. We evolutionists talk as if the SSSM model were a conceptual error that can be dispelled by evidence. This overlooks the potent bias driving the model, since it incorporates the enabling conditions of the democratic impulse that flowered in the French and American Revolutions. Consider the United States circa 1850. Although

national ideals resonated with liberty and equality for all, the facts were somewhat different. Millions of blacks were in slavery. The Amerindians were being driven onto reservations, usually with considerable loss of life and almost complete loss of quality of life. The rights of women to vote, to own property, to divorce, and enter vocations and professions were extremely limited. Asian workers were tightly controlled and homosexuals stayed in the closet. The voice of American democracy at that time was almost exclusively male and proud, so proud that it passionately believed that it was the aspiration of all the world's people.

And what happened since? The then scarcely audible voices of abolitionists and feminists have become dominant. The rights of indigenous peoples are now inviolable—putatively at least—and gender diversity is fashionable. These and other profound cultural changes define democratic beliefs today and administer sharp rebukes ('sexism', 'racism', 'homophobia') to any limitation allegedly based on human nature. And now for the hard question: was American society of 1850 consistent with an evolutionary explanation? The answer, let us admit, is Yes. In the 1870s Darwinism became flavor of the month and the *New York Times* Darwin obituary (1882) deemed his survival of the fittest doctrine to be the scientifically revealed truth about historical social dynamics. Just months after the national display of reverence for Darwin, Herbert Spencer arrived in the United States for a tour hosted by leading academics and by his celebrity admirer, Andrew Carnegie, who preached the free market practice that made him 'king of steel'. 'While the law of competition may be sometimes hard for the individual,' he was fond of saying, 'it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department'. This was the worldview that progressives fought and defeated in the universities and in countless social contests, thereby entrenching the SSSM model by about 1920. However, the model was vulnerable to rapid advance of genetics in the 1960s, especially in its medical and commercial applications. This created a space for the revival of evolutionary theory, but as the authors and this reviewer know from experience, it was a precarious perch for those of us in the social sciences.

Let us look now to the authors' discussion of democracy's enabling conditions. As I have noted, the 'Darwinian window' of escape from the default authoritarian position is indoctrination in democratic beliefs and principles. A key element of the 'civic disposition' is acceptance of rules for the conduct of life's business and the rejection of violence and intimidation as instruments for settling differences (p. 52). These rules differentiate as freedom of speech and assembly, government assemblies that canvass fact and opinion fairly, selection of representatives by free elections, a free press, an independent judiciary, military, and police. Implied by these conditions are others: the existence of a working government, broadly-based prosperity, broadly based literacy, and good health. Since authoritarian governments do not foster the 'civic disposition', how is the transition made? An authoritarian government committed to building a democracy is needed. The classic cases are the transformation of West Germany and Japan into democracies following World War II. (Another spectacular success, India, whose

transition was fostered by British colonial rule, isn't mentioned). Latin American governments have, for a century and a half, oscillated between democracy and military dictatorships rescuing democracy from collapse.

The main impediments to democracy, the authors say, are religious, national, ethnic, racial and tribal differences (52f.). They stress that these differences are often expressed through valorizing group histories of bloody xenophobic struggles. Thus, the newly independent India soon lost much of its Muslim population in a war that created Pakistan (which at that time included Bangladesh). They also stress the appalling carnage generated by these antagonisms. Mass murder, torture and torment, humiliation and vilification, property destruction and genocide are often inflicted to cries of glory, without a tremor of conscience, despite the media filming the carnage. The authors say only enough about these disturbing facts to goad readers to awareness of the demanding pre-requisites of a plausible nation building scenario: we are not to imagine that our confidence in the all-sided benefits of democracy will hold sway with peoples whose primary allegiance is to religious and ethnic loyalties. So be it. But there is an even more disturbing fact that the authors don't mention. Their proffered wisdom isn't altogether new. It is understood at senior levels of government, military, and intelligence establishments. And it has been known for a long time. Nevertheless, costly nation building initiatives, such as the liberation of Iraq, continue to be launched. Why?

Consider U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Governments willing to ally against Soviet initiatives were supported. For the most part those allies were authoritarian. Dissent condemned such support as hostile to aspiring democratic forces. In a few cases, notably South Africa, dissent eventually translated into policy. In many more cases, pro-democratic foreign policy undermined autocrats and assisted revolutions that, in the case of Iran, passed quickly through its liberal phase into Islamic autocracy. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not weaken this sentiment. It was expressed in offers to assist newly liberated East European nations to establish democracies. It was expressed in U.S. and European Union intervention in Kosovo and Bosnia. It was expressed in President Clinton's heroic effort to bring Israel and Palestinians into an enduring peace agreement. This list is long and affects many aspects of foreign and domestic policy.

The power of the influence is nicely illustrated by recent events in Australia. In March, the Department of Immigration granted asylum to forty-three persons from West Papua, Indonesia. Refugee status recognized that they were subject to persecution. West Papua, which has long been sought independence from Jakarta, is populated by Melanesians, as distinguished from the ruling Javanese. The Indonesian government was so angered by what it interpreted to be implicit recognition of West Papuan rebel claims that it recalled its ambassador—a serious injury to diplomatic relations. The startled Australian government quickly reaffirmed its recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua and pleaded that the decision was made on a non-political, case-by-case basis mandated by Australian immigration law. The example shows how the complexities of the contemporary world drew a government

into self-damaging de facto support of a fledgling democratic rebellion contrary to a major diplomatic policy orientation.

Nor is that the end of it. Human rights supporters in the government party rallied to the support of West Papuans and condemned Prime Minister John Howard's compromise on human rights. Ah, the authors may demur, granting asylum is hardly a nation building exercise. Quite so, but this forgets that Australian forces subdued violence in the former Indonesian province of East Timor, which subsequently voted for and obtained independence. The Indonesian government is determined to avoid repeating that scenario. Indeed, as I write, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is being feted by Jakarta in a highly publicized visit featuring cooperation between the two large Muslim countries. President Ahmadinejad is using his podium to denounce the Iraq war and to defy U.S. threats against its nuclear facilities.

Recognition of complex commitments pulling Australian and U.S. policy, willy nilly, toward nation building is not to deny that Iraq-scale interventions require policy decisions that may be informed by the authors' evidence and argument. This I warmly endorse and commend. A valuable sequel to their book would be a study of ethnic conflicts around the world and their analysis in terms of male dominance hierarchies, inclusive of charismatic leadership. Who knows, detailed documentation of our evolutionary inheritance might enlighten some policy makers after all.

**About the author:** Hiram Caton, PhD, DLitt, is retired professor of politics and history at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. He has published extensively on biopolitics and is currently writing a history of Nineteenth Century evolutionary theory.

## Notes

1. Of the large literature on primate behavior, readers might consult Stuart Altmann, *Baboon Ecology: African Field Research*, University of Chicago Press, 1970; Bernard Thierry, ed., *Macaque Societies: A Model for the Study of Social Organization*, Cambridge University Press, 2004; and Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape*, Riverhead Press, 2005.
2. This is a large and important subject about which, unfortunately, we evolutionists are seriously antagonistic. In addition to the titles mentioned, readers may consider *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of Our Ancestors*, Penguin, 2006, which describes current molecular discoveries about recent and on-going genetic differentiation of human populations. For a quick look at current research on the genetic basis of intelligence, see K. Burdick, et al, Genetic variation in DRNBPI influences general cognitive ability, *Human Molecular Genetics* 2006, Vol 15, No 10, 1563-1568. Of the many critiques of the view that intelligence is accurately measurable and biologically-based, Steven J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*, Norton, 1996, is among the most influential.