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Book Review

The New Monkey in the Mirror: A Rhesus Macaque Reflection

A review of Dario Maestripieri, *Macachiavellian Intelligence: How Rhesus Macaques and Humans Have Conquered the World*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 2007, \$25.00, 192 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-50117-8.

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“Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.” - Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Rhesus macaques have quite a bad reputation, at least among primatologists. This was first brought to my attention as an undergraduate working in developmental research, when I was instructed to tread firmly and vigilantly with this species as they are, to say the least, feisty (other, less kind terms, were also bantered about). I also know many researchers who have a great fondness for *Macaca mulatta*, despite the personality quirks for which the species is known. Dario Maestripieri, Associate Professor at the University of Chicago and a highly respected figure in primate research, has spent many years studying these macaques, and it is clear they have earned his respect.

What, then, is “Macachiavellian Intelligence”? The concept, at least as it has been applied to humans, is known as Machiavellianism, based on the work of Niccolo Machiavelli, who, in his work *The Prince*, describes how a ruler can gain and retain power by exploiting others; the concept is, essentially, social opportunism. If you happen to be a rhesus macaque, a primate species with a strict hierarchical social structure, you are born into your status: wherever your mother falls on the social ladder is where you end up, at least initially. Much time and energy goes into maintaining this status quo. High status individuals spend a lot of time reminding subordinates who’s boss – and low status monkeys spend a whole lot of time avoiding these reminders and attempting, when possible, to improve their situation ... often by exploiting others.

In Maestripieri’s book, the reader is introduced to the world of *M. mulatta* via a young rhesus macaque named Buddy, whose group turns on him after he is placed back with them before fully recovering from anesthesia. His behavior is wrong, as far as his fellow rhesus are concerned. This is reason enough to attack him - and he *is* attacked, even by a playmate. It’s a rough and dangerous life, and showing vulnerability is the kiss of

death. Rhesus macaques need little excuse to flex their social muscle and downgrade – or, in rare cases, do away with entirely – another member of their group.

Such is life in a Macchiavellian world. Maestriperi goes on to describe how this type of “nepotistic and despotic” society would come into being, with kinship as the critical variable. In *M. mulatta*, females remain in their natal groups while males disperse; females, surrounded by relatives, make the rules. One might make the mistake of assuming that this would lead to a more peaceful society, but one would be very wrong. In constant defense of their place in the hierarchy, these females have no problem laying on the aggression.

Given that, as Maestriperi writes, human society has evolved from male-based kinship groups à la chimpanzees, what is it that we have in common with rhesus macaques? Kinship bonds determine who has the power, but what is the source of our social-climbing ways? Maestriperi argues that individual geographic mobility is the defining factor in determining nepotism, while the key to despotism is availability of resources and individual monopolization potential (he acknowledges a number of other factors as well). Although we show more variation in the degree to which we express these traits than do our rhesus cousins, I certainly felt compelled by Maestriperi’s arguments that macaques and Machiavelli are collectively on the same page.

To soften the blow of just how similar we are to these uppity Cercopithecines, Maestriperi ends the book with a chapter on the origins of love and compassion in a “Macchiavellian” world. Being the most widely dispersed primate species worldwide (the species in second place? You got it – *M. mulatta*) has led to our living in large groups with many unrelated individuals. He suggests that we may have “developed an acquired biological taste for egalitarianism and the moral principles that support it” (p. 170). Could our more recent evolutionary history have provided the framework for our inclination to work for social equality? The idea has a comforting appeal; perhaps has we continue as the most successful members of the primate species, this part of our nature will become more pronounced – much to the likely distress of Fox News executives (and more than a few of their political allies).

I have only covered a minute fraction of what goes on between the covers of this book. Scapegoating, revolutions, xenophobia, the use of sex as a commodity: reading about all the dirty details of the rhesus macaque world (and its human correlates) was pure pleasure – which may itself say a great deal about the Macchiavellian inclinations of *Homo sapiens*. One of the great joys of this book is Maestriperi’s use of pop culture-based metaphors: he illustrates the workings of a dominance hierarchy by using Hollywood tough guys Chuck Norris, Clint Eastwood and Steven Seagal, and the image of a young rhesus male dressed as Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*, ready to kick major monkey booty, is forever imprinted on my mind.

I have no serious qualms with this book – quite the opposite, really; however, on occasion, I was less than convinced by parts of the commentary on the human side of things. For the most part, the treatment of issues of male and female power were fair and well-supported, and although I readily admit that most of my time is spent in contemplation of non-human primate behavior, I must take issue with a statement from chapter six: “Maybe one day women will decide that they want more than good-looking children and a secure and comfortable life, and will set their sights instead on political power. Maybe one day the women who have learned to run a successful sex business will stop playing their own private game and will join with other women to form political parties and big

corporations the way men do” (p. 105). I appreciate this suggestion of female revolution, but it is a simplistic (and, let’s face it, insulting) view of how women operate. Certainly, women should wield more equal influence, but I’m not sure that behaving like men is the way to go about it.

Are human beings truly Machiavellian by nature? Is there an evolutionary inclination to manipulate? There seems to be little doubt that *Homo sapiens* possess these tendencies, but, as Maestripieri notes, we also possess the ability to make choices about how and if we use them. As Dawkins (1989) wrote, “Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish” (p. 3). Perhaps we can continue to foster those former traits while acknowledging that there will always be a darker side to our natures.

Maestripieri has studied rhesus macaques all over the world, and his knowledge of and fascination with this species make this book a delight to read. While we most often look to chimpanzees as the primate species we most resemble (despite my personal wishes for a more bonobo-esque world), his claim that the “monkey in the mirror” looking back at us may look surprisingly like a rhesus macaque is highly compelling. I think it’s safe to say that in many ways, we bear a striking resemblance to these fraught and frisky primate relatives of ours.

Reference

Dawkins, Richard. (1989). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.