

Full Circle

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Robin Fox's book from which his essay is adapted is so remarkable and robust that there seems no graceful inroad into writing about it other than grand and often bewildered admiration. What a good challenge, of course. But I've another kind of problem when I show my passport to the custodian of academic propriety which is that so much of what Fox writes about here and how and why and where and with whom involves my life too, which threatens to produce an inescapable episode of verboten and narcissistic academic indulgence.

But it ain't that. Fox provides here not only an assertion but also a history of a time and times and places and folks and what they did and why and with what effect. It so happens that from Robin's and my meeting in 1965 at a symposium of the London Zoological Society organized by Sir Julian Huxley to our present association at Rutgers University we have been endlessly inter-involved. Robin used to joke that "When Tiger dies, they'll bury me." Or the other way around—I forget. But the fact is that Robin is such a good and honest writer that he warmly and expertly discusses the London School of Economics and the Gellners, Poppers, Firths, McRae's, Mairs, Bowlbys, Kupers, Turners, et.al. He articulates a period of history and the place it happened which becomes redolently alive and I was there too.

The only reason this is of the slightest interest is that it was then and there with stunning naiveté and young innocent arrogance we concluded a few days of discussion in Robin's office at the LSE by writing "The Zoological

Perspective in Social Science" which was all of 9 printed pages of *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1996. This announced nothing less than the imperative program of reuniting the duality in intellectual and university work of social and natural science. What was the point of such a stark and arbitrary distinction about vital and central matters? How could social behavior not be natural? Why didn't biologists appreciate the cultures of the animals they studied? A creature that had no body and hence no biology was an absurdity while a wholly-solitary being would presumably never reproduce. What mind-body problem?

We announced it was time for change and I call this brief comment "Full Circle" because we were largely right. Not that we were particularly prescient individuals but because it seemed clear that the world of science would uncover regularities and mysteries of nature which had been unknown if not suspected. On the front page of our *The Imperial Animal* of 1971 we cited Jacques Monod's regulation "Tout être vivant est aussi un fossile". Of course. And voila, there was the DNA coding to reify it.

Of course many disagreed then and disagree still. The low-oxygen post-modern this-and-that fog continues to dull reality in a manner and with a confidently glad anti-empiricism which neither Fox nor I or the two of us a duet had ever expected to become the viral suffocating force it became. And if it is so that the perspective we sketched was largely robust, the fact remains that Fox had still to write this learned and lengthy book to explain why and how the synthetic meld of social and natural science was basically correct. And he had to go a giant bold step further to firmly fold literature and the study of myth into the biosocial synthesis.

The fact remains that after all the DNA-mongering and neuroscience and endocrinology and study of primate

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communities in the wild and symposia on laws of nature and people, Fox still ends up titling his movie elementally: *The Tribal Imagination*. This doesn't mean tribes are primordial. Let's channel Levi-Straus to remember that the two major products of time spent around the campfire are imagination which is *cuit* and kinship which is *cru*. Remember also that among animals, groups and the family groups are central. Kin recognition is omnipresent—as in the improbable fact that even bats in caves are able to identify their siblings. How the hell? In fact it was at a seminar of Robin's at the LSE that I first saw the heartbreaking warming film of Jane Goodall's which showed the story of a female with baby who had lost or been driven from her natal group and then sat patiently at the periphery of the new group she wished to join. After a time of compliant patience she became familiar and presumably acceptable. Then when the process had matured in turn she shook the hands of the adult females in the group and moved silently and formally into the circle to which she now belonged. Immigration is cross-cultural and cross-specific. You always need your papers.

That female's movement takes us fast-forward to the “default system of social behavior [which] has not changed from that of the Upper Paleolithic savage” and which in contemporary life underlies the endless and frequently lacerating turbulence surrounding immigration. The ever-increasing number of states inexorably expands the boundaries of possible friction yielding outright combat or holding camps for unwanted immigrants. And of course as Fox emphasizes huge increases in human population have made obsolete or wholly exceptional the stately experience of Goodall's female asking for room at the inn. As well the pulsating impact of primordial loyalties in states from Yemen to Greece to China generates political issues of ethnic and religious loyalty which the smooth elixir of bureaucratic clarity and promised fairness do not make obsolete. Even the theoretically elegant bureaucracy and eurocracy of an ambitious and endlessly rigmaroled Europe are unlikely to avoid possibly fatal dysfunctions caused by disconnection between economies which are general and states which are tribal. Here again that Fox's bimodal vision becomes up-to-the-minute of an old creature facing new problems mainly with old tools. Old Adam has at least two warring sons.

But what about this last man?

Here Fox returns to one of his Greek words—*thymos*—which refers to the gift of recognition for his or her efforts a community awards to a member. *Thymos* trumps full equality and similarity every time. That old Darwinian competitiveness for reproductive success is mediated by hierarchical position seemingly inevitably. This must be acknowledged by any group or tribe interested in survival, most plainly in forthright circumstances which features warrior and hunters. But this applies equally to literary and academic communities in which Pulitzers and pastoral séances at writers' retreats loom large. When Edmund Wilson was asked what he thought people wanted, he said “To be distinguished”.

One of Fox's most serious points of scholarly reference is the work of the remarkable Frank Fukuyama. Fukuyama has most recently published the first of two volumes on *The Origins of Political Order* (2011) in which Fukuyama's recognition of the pulsating underlying forces derived from biological nature takes the form of an international tour of the manner in which a common element, expression and control of hierarchy, has yielded communities and systems of varying durability and pleasure. And it is clear that the excitements of community and participation may even balance out well against the boredom of for example European governments. This could lead and has led on dispiriting occasion to acceptance of war as a form of satisfying if potentially ruinous social action. In its most recent iteration, the morally and ethically smooth veneer of bureaucratic control has been challenged especially in Europe and often on the issue of immigration. And of course inasmuch as new countries or territories emerge, rather than the opposite (of consolidation), we have already noted that there are therefore more boundaries, more proud national armies, and more opportunity within them for glorious bellicosity. To cite Fox here again “The tribal imagination and the civilized imagination are both lodged in the same brain and tap the same resources”. There are no specifically “animal spirits”, just spirits. And so, Full Circle, the results are in.

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