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Book Review

PAUL H. RUBIN (2002) *Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom*, New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press.

In his book, Paul Rubin argues that the theory of evolution and the evolutionary history of humans are relevant for understanding contemporary political behavior. He claims that the underlying political taste for freedom, which is best fulfilled in modern western societies, is a biological heritage from the hunter-gatherer bands of human prehistory.

Starting by linking biology and politics, Rubin then analyzes group and social behavior, altruism and cooperation, envy, political power, the role of religion in politics, and individual decision-making, before he summarizes the policy implications of political behavior shaped by human prehistory for contemporary political decision-making.

Concerning methodology, Rubin uses the framework of evolutionary psychology in order to provide a reading of political behaviors and preferences common to humans today, regarding them as the result of our biological evolution as humans. Rubin substitutes the concept of the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (EEA), corresponding to the time when humans evolved as species, for the concept of the state of nature, thus imposing constraints on cultural evolution. However, rather than studying prehistorical coevolution of biology and culture, Rubin focuses on biological evolution and employs a comparative static approach, comparing human prehistory—the EEA—and the present rather than a dynamic approach, studying the evolutionary process from human prehistory, through human history up to the present. Consequently, Rubin leaves history and cultural evolution as a black box.

In order to study politics as an evolutionary process, history and cultural evolution are essential. The spontaneously evolved social order is based on both the innate, genetically inherited rules of human behavior and the learned, culturally transmitted rules of human conduct (Hayek 1967, 1973). Rubin tries to explain current social orders by innate, genetically inherited rules that emerged during human prehistory, but such an explanation is insufficient. Intentionality, which shapes institutions, has its background both in the deep background common to all cultures and in local cultural practices that vary between cultures (Searle 1999). The deep background is itself a blend of biology and culture.

Using Searle's (1999) view of consciousness, upon which intentionality is based, as a unified field from the start, and Hayek's (1952) view of the map, as apparatus of classification which represents events that the organism has met during its whole past, the analysis of the evolution of political institutions of a free society requires dynamics rather than Rubin's comparative statics. Cultural evolution includes human biological evolution, but not the other way around.

Engerman, Haber and Sokoloff (2000) show how factor endowments shape institutions. In this context, it would have been interesting to see the interaction between innate, genetically inherited rules and factor endowments in shaping learned, culturally transmitted rules, but

this remains to be done. Rubin's book would have been more complete if he had substituted an analysis of biology and culture for the discussion of individual decision-making.

Nevertheless, Rubin seems aware of the limitations of his biology of politics. When studying group selection, he states that cultural and genetic evolution can reinforce each other, because cultural norms may favor altruism and make individuals more successful, but he focuses on the genetic part of the process (p. 64). He also studies religion, which is an important element of culture. His rationale is that religion is an important part of political behavior and the biology of politics would be incomplete without it (p. 135). Rubin acknowledges that a cultural evolution model gives the best theory to explain the success of Christianity and Islam (p. 138).

Rubin's contribution is to show that modern western political systems are the most consistent with human preferences for freedom and small groups that evolved in prehistorical small hunter-gatherer bands with their reverse dominance hierarchies. Most of human history is an unnatural state of reduced freedom (p. 113). However, if freedom belongs to our prehistorical heritage, so do envy and repression.

The main experience with hierarchies in the EEA would have been with dominance or consumption hierarchies (p. 101) that allocate resources on a zero-sum basis, in contrast to hierarchies for productive purposes (p. 96). Envy, which is caused by the confusion between different types of hierarchies, gives the foundation for redistributive policies aimed at reducing the incomes of the wealthy that are remnants of the desire of our ancestors to reduce the power of dominants (p. 109). Nonlibertarian preferences evolved in the EEA (p. 148). Hence, both freedom and repression belong to our mixed prehistorical heritage.

Yet, Rubin's detailed analyses provide valuable insights. The flexible hierarchical group membership, which is essential in current large societies, is traced back to group membership based upon kinship of hunter-gatherer bands (pp. 33ff), while the essence of politics is the difficulty of coordinating a larger population (p. 39). Kin-based groups may also explain ethnic conflict, which has reduced through learning and cultural change (p. 46). Efficient altruism that yields cooperation in the small bands of the EEA may in modern societies turn inefficient, especially with government expansion (pp. 65–70). The view of utilitarianism as the result of fitness maximization makes Rubin say yes to Bentham, but no to Rawls and Marx whose philosophies cause free riding (pp. 72ff).

When studying envy Rubin makes important distinctions, such as between monopoly through acquisition of rivals and through predation from monopoly through efficiency (p. 93), between hierarchies for dominance or consumption and for production, and between government and other productive hierarchies (pp. 96–105). He points out the confusion between hierarchies as the source behind human hostility to productive hierarchies, because the human opposition to dominance is inappropriately applied to productive hierarchies (pp. 106ff).

However, Rubin's reading may perhaps not always be the most plausible one. He makes a distinction between redistributive policies designed to increase the incomes of the poor and aimed at reducing the incomes of the rich. Preferences for the former would have evolved in the small communities of the EEA, while the latter are remnants of our ancestors to reduce the power of dominants (p. 109). However, the evolution of states and uneven, concentrated political power occurred during early human history (p. 118). How much envy

can be attributed to prehistorical egalitarianism compared with the reduced freedom of most of human history? Rubin argues that Soviet society lost out in a Darwinian competition with capitalism, which is a productive system of freedom, more consistent with evolved preferences for interaction in small groups (p. 125). How plausible is such a genetically inherited preference compared with a culturally transmitted preference created from fitness in using imperfect, dispersed knowledge?

When Rubin studies how religion may enforce moral rules, he points at the instability of libertarianism. In the EEA, libertarianism would not have been viable, while outlawed polygyny in the most successful modern societies has reduced the level of internal level of conflict, and group survival requires rules interfering with individual autonomy and free markets (pp. 140–145). Yet, the enforcement of antilibertarian social norms may be more expensive today (p. 150). This tradeoff between social stability and individual freedom is important, but moral rules are certainly not contrary to a free society. Hayek (1979) shows that gradually evolved moral beliefs are crucial to a free exchange society and that a cultural selection of learnt rules have allowed us to go beyond the small hunter-gatherer bands. The analytical cost of ignoring culture is no doubt significant.

This book gives valuable insights about the biology of politics, but it generally ignores the role of culture and suffers from the errors of sociobiology identified by Hayek (1979): it ignores that cultural evolution is a faster process than biological evolution and its dominating position among humans. Even when studying human prehistory, one cannot ignore culture. In Hayek's (1979) analysis, the most important part of cultural evolution was completed long before recorded history begins, and mind and culture developed concurrently. Rubin has written an interesting, but incomplete, book that challenges Austrian economists to write about the biology and culture of politics and explain both the deep background and the local cultural practices behind political intentionality.

References

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