

Cultural Evolution and Prosociality: Widening the Hypothesis Space

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Abstract: Norenzayan and colleagues suggest that Big Gods can be replaced by Big Governments. We examine forms of social and self-monitoring and ritual practice that emerged in Classical China, heterarchical societies like those that emerged in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and the contemporary Zapatista movement of Chiapas, and we recommend widening the hypothesis space to include these alternative forms of social organization.

Norenzayan and colleagues offer a rich, syncretic account of how prosocial religions allowed societies to scale-up from bands of hunter-gatherers to the large-scale, multi-ethnic societies we now inhabit. They argue that successful cultures foster cooperation, harmony, solidarity, and growth by: 1) outsourcing social monitoring to moralizing Big Gods; 2) developing rituals to build and signal commitment; and 3) creating practices to exploit in-group favoritism and tribal psychology. With secularization (1) erodes, and (2) and (3) can decay in turn. So how can societies leave behind Big Gods while remaining prosocial? Norenzayan and colleagues suggest that as Big Gods wane, Big Govs--that is, Big Governments--can serve as surrogates. But are there other possibilities?

The hierarchical thought and organization fostered by Big Gods (like those of the Abrahamic traditions) and Big Govs manage prosociality from the top down. But centralized power can be supplemented (or even replaced) by forms of mutual accountability that are sustained by more mundane forms of social monitoring and communal practice. Focusing on religious traditions that flourished in the Levant, and forming hypotheses in light of these, may downplay other ways of fostering cooperation and prosociality, which flourished in other parts of the world.

Classical China provides an interesting example. As Norenzayan and colleagues note, Big Gods clearly exist in the earliest historical record, and they exhibit moral concern. Yet it's unclear what role they played in fostering prosociality and enabling widespread cooperation and trust (Sarkissian 2014). Big Govs, including centralized governance backed by state punishment, played a substantial role. And other forms of monitoring and ritual practice (1 and 2, above) developed alongside these forms of top-down governance. Commitments to social

monitoring developed early in China, in part owing to the advent of labor-intensive sustenance agriculture (Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Shared commitments to cooperation were crucial in this context, spurring practices of self and other monitoring, along with increased attunement to one's impact on others (Sarkissian, 2010). Social and self monitoring continue to influence prosociality in collectivist societies today (e.g. Heine et al, 2008; Sarkissian, 2014), and they might lessen the need for Big Gods or Big Govs. Moreover, when it comes to ritual practice, there is a sizable and impressive literature in the classical period (not unlike the theory adopted by Norenzayan and colleagues) that recognizes its instrumental value in strengthening social bonds and taming personal impulse, promoting harmonious prosocial behavior without supernatural incentives (e.g. Puett, 2013). Mundane monitoring and ritual theory, then, can be found alongside Big Gods and Big Govs in the classical period, and both are amenable to appropriation today.

The heterarchical power structures that developed in Mesoamerica suggest a second interesting phenomenon. The lowland Mayan economy relied on short-range, self-organized practices of exchange, but they made room for the centrally-controlled exchange of ritual goods (Potter & King 2008). Similarly, the massive, multi-ethnic city of Teotihuacan appears to have been organized as a decentralized network of semi-autonomous communities, structured around kinship, but leaving room for corporate governance (Manzanilla 2012). The archeological remains at Teotihuacan reveal a distinctive lack of dynastic monuments and limited interest in emulating existing Mayan and Zapotec writing systems, which were commonly used to record dynastic information. Self-organizing practices can be resilient to fluctuations in the availability of goods and resources, and they can preserve ethnic and cultural diversity. There is no consensus regarding the nature of the gods at Teotihuacan, but costly rituals and CREDS (including bloodletting and ritual intoxication) were critical to inter-group cooperation and the maintenance of local power throughout Mesoamerica (Munson et al 2014). And it is possible that periodic large-scale rituals also could have solidified cooperation in Teotihuacan (Froese et al 2014). But even if the religion of Teotihuacan included watcher-gods, the heterarchical structure of that city suggests another important factor that can facilitate large-scale cooperation. Within large cities, small communities often build cooperative institutions to manage common-pool resources. Instead of relying on centralized power, they settle on rules collectively and rely on mundane social monitoring to maintain individual commitments to self-governance, leading each individual to follow the rules they devise together (Ostrom 1990). We believe that Norenzayan and colleagues could enhance their theory by considering the interplay between multiple ways of fostering cooperation in such heterarchical societies. But are there social structures that can manage cooperation and accountability exclusively from the bottom?

Among the Zapatistas of Chiapas today, decisions are grounded in the consensus of community assemblies; deliberative practices are designed to foster egalitarian attitudes and provide alternatives to hierarchy and centralized power. This has led to the creation of new forms of participatory dialogue that foster autonomy and dignity, and forms of network-based organization that foster forms of cooperation that are locally salient, dynamic, and sensitive to everyone's needs and interests. The Zapatistas also rely on forms of social monitoring and punishment that are distributed, temporary, and centered around community service (though extreme cases may warrant expulsion), and there is an ongoing commitment to creating "the power to solve their own problems and to do so democratically" (Starr et al., 2011, 102-3). We

believe that secularization may be possible under a collective mode of self-governance such as this, so long as such practices can sustain mutual accountability and use CREDs to signal ongoing commitments to shared practices.

If alternative social structures like these are consistent with the view developed by Norenzayan and colleagues, we should widen the hypothesis space to include these other forms of social power. They might reveal interesting ways of conceptualizing the role of ritual in secular practice, as well as forms of socially-relevant 'faith', grounded not in beliefs about Big Gods or Big Govs, but instead in ways of living and acting together in accordance with shared ideals and values (Carpenter 2012; Preston-Roedder 2013). And they may open up a broader understanding of how our sensitivity to CREDs can attune us to more mundane (and less Godlike) practices of social monitoring.

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