



Coordinated policy action and flexible coalitional psychology: How evolution made humans so good at politics

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Abstract

The observation that politics makes strange bedfellows may be hackneyed, but it is also often true: Politicians and other actors in the policy process routinely align themselves on specific issues with actors with whom they otherwise have broad disagreements. This fits with social psychological research showing that humans have a coalitional psychology that is remarkably flexible, allowing us to feel strong bonds toward the coalitions to which we belong but to also break those bonds and move on to new coalitions when circumstances change. How is this flexibility possible? Here we examine the possible ways in which evolutionary forces helped shape our species' trademark flexible coalitional psychology, focusing in particular on gene-culture coevolution and cultural group selection. We conclude with some examples of coordinated policy action among erstwhile foes in contemporary politics.

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1. Introduction

In early 2015, a political coalition that included Charles and David Koch, Americans for Tax Reform, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for American Progress, and the NAACP, among others, announced a campaign to support criminal sentencing reform in the United States, the country with the largest prison population and the highest imprisonment rate in the world. The announcement was met by exclamations of surprise from journalists and political pundits. Organizations that had routinely opposed each other on such varied topics as financial regulation, collective bargaining, healthcare, and climate change were now working together as part of a

\$5 million coalition to reform aspects of the criminal justice system.

Neera Tanden, the president of the Center for American Progress, told *The New York Times*: “We have in the past and will in the future have criticism of the policy agenda of the Koch brother companies, but where we can find common ground on issues, we will go forward. I think it speaks to the importance of the issue” (Hulse, 2015).

Although this was perhaps an extreme case -- or in any case, unusual enough to warrant numerous news stories -- for those who study policymaking, the idea that politics makes strange bedfellows is commonplace.¹ A Google

¹ The phrase “strange bedfellows” originates in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, although there it was not “politics” but “misery” in the form of a storm that prompts the jester Trinculo to seek shelter under Caliban’s cape. The essayist Charles Dudley Warner was the first to add “politics” to the phrase as he mused about strawberries, raspberries, garden beds, and politicians of the era (Warner, 1871, 131).

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Scholar search of the phrase brings up dozens of scholarly articles, many of them considering cases of former enemies working together toward some common political goal. How is it possible for people who are otherwise so much at odds to join forces in this way?

In fact, former enemies work together in politics (and in life) so often that there may be a tendency to find the cooperation unsurprising. It may seem simply rational that former opponents would work together if they share common ground on some new issue, as the libertarian Koch brothers and the left-leaning Center for American Progress clearly did. But although this mutualistic action is perhaps “rational” in game theoretic terms, such choices would be unusual behavior in any nonhuman primate. Although many nonhuman primates cooperate within their own groups, outsiders are often physically attacked (De Waal, 2007; van der Dennen, 1995). No matter how mutually advantageous it might potentially be (and contrary to whatever may have been portrayed in the *Planet of the Apes* movies), different bands of nonhuman primates (let alone different species) do not routinely join together for common purposes (such as taking over the world).

Why are humans so good at forming and reforming teams and working with one-time enemies? The answer suggested by evolutionary theory is that our species possesses a flexible coalitional psychology that evolved in the context of gene-culture coevolution and cultural group selection. In the rest of this article, we will explain the evolutionary underpinnings of flexible coalitional psychology and provide some examples from the literature on policymaking of it in action.

2. Why are humans so good at forming teams?

The human ability to form, dissolve, and re-form teams is extraordinary. How did this ability evolve? What aspects of our cognitive architecture help us in this regard? In this section, we explore four things that are involved. First, we point out that our species’ ability to cooperate in general is largely a reflection of our ability to coordinate our social behaviors, a skill made possible by the evolution of several specific cognitive mechanisms, in particular the ability to imagine other people’s cognitive states. Second, we explain the theory of gene-culture coevolution. Third, we link the idea of gene-culture coevolution to the theory of cultural group selection. Finally, we argue that the key to our species’ ability to form teams is our flexible coalitional psychology, which evolved through a combination of gene-culture coevolution and cultural group selection.

2.1. Theory of Mind and social coordination

Much of the evolutionary literature on cooperation has concerned collective action dilemmas, in particular the two-person collective action dilemma modeled by the Prisoner’s Dilemma scenario (e.g., Axelrod, 1984). However,

increasing attention is now being paid to coordination problems and the cognitive, behavioral, and cultural adaptations that help humans solve them (e.g., Alvard, 2001; Cronk, 2015; Cronk & Leech, 2013; Tomasello, 2009). Research has shown, for example, that humans are much better than nonhuman primates at following each other’s gaze (Wyman & Tomasello, 2007). This shared *attention* may be a step to shared *intention* (Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007) which may in turn be a step toward full blown Theory of Mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Also known as mentalizing, Theory of Mind is the ability to imagine the mental states of others and to understand that those mental states may differ from one’s own. Cognitively normal humans excel at this kind of mind-reading, so it could simply be a byproduct or reflection of our species’ impressive cognitive abilities in general. However, studies of Theory of Mind development in children and of people who lack it in adulthood support the idea that it evolved due to selection pressure specifically for its usefulness in social coordination rather than as a side effect of our high general intelligence (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Interestingly, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies indicate that the same part of the brain, the medial prefrontal cortex, is used for thinking about the mental states of others and when cooperating with other players in economic games – but not when playing against a computer (Schreiber, 2012, 559).

Although many nonhumans do interact socially without possessing much in the way of Theory of Mind abilities (and although there is some evidence of Theory of Mind in nonhumans, e.g. Bugnyar, Reber, & Buckner, 2016; Hare, Call, & Tomasello, 2001), it is no exaggeration to say that human social life - and in particular human politics - would be impossible without our well-developed skills at imagining other people’s mental states - their emotions, their knowledge, and so on. This applies, of course, not only to our friends but also to our foes. While the minute-by-minute theories about others’ mental states we create may or may not be accurate, they are essential to our abilities to work in coalitions or to outfox our opponents.

2.2. Gene-culture coevolution

Evolutionary behavioral scientists, whether they study humans or nonhumans, generally define culture as *socially transmitted information* (Alvard, 2003; Cronk, 1995, 1999). In anthropology, such ideational definitions have roots going back to at least the 1950s and the advent of cognitive, symbolic, and interpretive approaches to the study of culture (Keesing, 1974). For behavioral science, the advantage of ideational definitions of culture is that they clearly separate behavior from culture, thus making it possible to use culture, along with other factors, to explain behavior in causal terms (Cronk, 1999, 2016). Ideational definitions do share one characteristic with virtually all other definitions of culture circulating among anthropologists and

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