

An Evolved Perspective on Fairness

JUSTIN JENNINGS, 2021, *Finding Fairness: From Pleistocene Foragers to Contemporary Capitalists*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 321 pp., ISBN: 9780813066745 (hardback)

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What is fairness? How did our perception of what is fair develop? How does a sense of what is fair (and what is not) define not only human behavior but also the overarching trajectory of human societal complexity? Jennings' "Finding Fairness" is a sprawling, and yet tightly focused, exploration of the concept of fairness in human societies. It establishes the evolutionary basis for innate human expectations of equity and catalogues the development of the organizational strategies that humans have devised in order to promote in-group fairness and equality. It also explores how those very institutions served to facilitate inequality and the emergence of stratified political-economic systems.

One of the great strengths of this book is its clear organization. It is an ambitious review of human biological and cultural evolution, moving seamlessly from our hominin ancestors to the Occupy movement. There was ample opportunity for Jennings to go off-course, but his structure helps the author and the reader stay focused on the core thesis about fairness. The meat of the book is divided up into seven chapters that explore the evolution of the cognitive and institutional apparatuses that define and promote fairness. Four well-chosen case studies from around the globe are deployed in each chapter to illustrate key points of convergence and divergence. While one could critique this organization as promoting neoevolutionary or stepwise stages of human societal

development, the overall impression is one of organizational necessity as opposed to an overly categorical approach.

Jennings argues that humanity's unique expectations for equity evolved among our Pleistocene ancestors' need to act cooperatively. His (oft-cited in the book) foundations for what we perceive as right and wrong include: "(1) familial hierarchy; (2) fierce egalitarianism; (3) widespread, frequent collaboration; (4) within-group trust and allegiance; and (5) task-based leadership." He argues that these tendencies first emerged among australopithecines where a more human sense of collaboration, trust, and affiliation was needed to survive the challenges of life on the open savannah. The development of our social brains was facilitated by an extended childhood including learning, play and socialization among archaic Homo populations of increasing size. The resulting behavioral flexibility allowed our ancestors to overcome shifting social and environmental circumstances at the end of the Pleistocene and set the stage for the cultural developments that would take place over the next 10,000-plus years.

While Jennings' core thesis is about fairness, this book is also about social institutions. One of his most salient theoretical contributions concerns how institutions—families; leaders; the state; courts; markets—were developed to solve objective problems or needs—subsistence; conflict resolution; governance; long-distance trade. As human societies moved through various transitions—sedentism; larger villages; urbanism; imperial and capitalist expansion—the previous institutions were a) no longer able to solve the collective action problems arising from new circumstances and b) the basis for the creation of new institutional forms. "People manipulated, rather than eliminated traditional social practices to meet the demands of new circumstances" (p. 96-97).

The discussion of "settling down" illustrates the similar challenges and solutions humans faced when they began forming larger social aggregates whether in place, like the Natufians, or through periodic aggregations where social ties were affirmed and renewed. Jennings notes that collective action problems were often solved by corporate decision-making and that leadership and status in these societies tends to be task-based and focused on those traits that provide group-wide benefits. Many of the cultural features and transitions discussed are well-trod ground in anthropological archaeology, but the persistent focus on fairness casts these institutions in a new light. For example, rather than painting the Neolithic or urban revolutions as abrupt shifts, Jennings argued that the commitment to fairness forged into the Pleistocene endured, shaping how groups

responded to scalar stress and the organizational challenges posed by settlement aggregation. He positions kin-based families as the basal social unit in human societies and sees the emergence of sodalities composed of people with shared interests engendered by common descent, religious beliefs, professions, or other interests as an effort to regain the inter-group sense of trust and equality inherent in those basal units. Integrative mechanisms—feasts, funerals, and ceremonies—were created to reinforce group-based identities. But, the same events were also vehicles for the accumulation of power. Certain sodalities emerged that held a greater share of wealth, power, or influence. In some cases, the metaphor of the household or family gave the emergence and control of rulers a gloss that resembled the familial hierarchy baked into our Pleistocene-forged brains. When the encroachment and overreach of the state started to feel unfair, markets emerged as the new leveler. As local institutions eroded in the modern era, people turned to the market as the best means to ensure fairness across poorly-consolidated groups. But, as Jennings highlights through his cases of cultural encounters with early (England, Japan) and late (Madagascar, Amazonia Brazil) capitalism, private enterprise is a beast bred to tear apart the fabric of local institutions. The challenges of maintaining in-group equality in the face of increasing cosmopolitanism and the blending of ethnic and other contemporary identities is a fascinating element of his discussion. If fairness is engendered by proximity, family, and identity, the dynamism, delocalization, and diversity of the current era poses a challenge to those evolved mechanisms for ensuring fairness.

There are two weak points: While Jennings does an excellent job of including pastoralists and nomadic societies among his case studies, there is still the feeling that a range of not-village and not-city social configurations are absent from the book (though I am in favor of the clear avoidance of the chiefdom concept). Another persistent omission is gender. The emphasis on the naturalness of familial hierarchy and the king-as-head of household framework employed in chapters on states and empires lends the book an androcentric bias. Attention to issues of gender equity and the gendered stratification of labor and decision-making power would have been a welcome addition and helped counteract the patriarchal tendencies inherent in mainstream archaeological discourse on emergent complexity.

Jennings' points about the fragmentation of maximal social units (nation-states, empires) exposing the weakness of local institutions can be summed up as “the bigger they come, the harder they fall,” with extensive societal fragmentation the result. A similar conclusion was reached by another recent meta-synthesis on the concept of “good government” and how societal collapse can

be better understood as moral collapse (Blanton et al. 2020)—the failure of leaders to maintain fairness. Jennings notes in his conclusions that this species-level introspection is driven by observations about the contemporary distrust of the nation-state and what feels like global backsliding in terms of post-WWII transnational social contracts. A stagnation of global action has led to the weakening of global identity. Radical cosmopolitanism is hard to sustain. The solution may thus be in creating institutional infrastructure that supports the creation and maintenance of the same community-based sodalities at the “local” level (virtual or otherwise) that allowed people to solve collective action problems in those early village societies. Finding fairness means confronting the complexity of the present using derived insights about how people have overcome the challenges in our shared past. This is the silver lining of the volume, and as discussed in another recent work (Boivin and Crowther 2021) may just help us deliver on archaeology’s promise of looking back to find creative solutions in an uncertain future.

References:

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