

HENRICH, NATALIE & JOSEPH HENRICH. *Why humans cooperate: a cultural and evolutionary explanation*. xi, 267 pp., figs, bibliogr. Oxford: Univ. Press, 2007. £45.00 (cloth), £19.99 (paper)

Why do humans co-operate? Social anthropologists do not usually ask this kind of question: we take co-operation for granted. But if anthropology is the study of what it means to be human, we should not be satisfied with this. From a Darwinian perspective, the evolution of co-operation in the human species is notoriously difficult to explain. In no other species do we find large-scale, systematic co-operation between individuals who may be biologically unrelated or

even unknown to one another. Most of what is taken to be standard Darwinian theory would rule this out on theoretical grounds.

Natalie and Joseph Henrich have collaborated to provide an excellent up-to-date overview of current debates addressing what they describe as 'one of the great puzzles in the human sciences' (p. 3). A strength of the book is its close interweaving of Joseph's theoretical modelling and analysis with the results of his partner Natalie's eighteen-month ethnographic fieldwork among the Chaldeans in Detroit – a mostly middle- and upper-class community of first-, second-, and third-generation Catholic immigrants from Iraq.

To explain co-operation among the Chaldeans, the authors elaborate on an idea first proposed by Darwin. In *The descent of man* (1871), Darwin wrote that his theory of natural selection would be hard-pressed to explain the evolution of a human instinct for sacrificing one's life for the common good. So might social admiration for heroism take over where instinct failed, thereby inspiring men to perform noble deeds by following celebrated examples? Is competition between 'tribes' – the fitness of each enhanced by the heroism of its members – the best way to explain man's lofty 'intellectual and moral faculties'? Darwin was prepared to consider the possibility.

It has to be said that most evolutionary biologists today would argue that Darwin was quite wrong here. What is nowadays called 'group selection' either does not work, or can operate only under such improbable conditions as to render the idea of only marginal interest. Henrich and Henrich disagree. In explaining distinctively human co-operation, they treat group selection as one important mechanism among others – alongside kin selection (co-operation between relatives), reciprocal altruism (co-operation as 'tit-for-tat'), and costly signalling theory ('showing off' that one can afford to co-operate). Their main point is that culture makes a difference. It is humans' highly unusual 'evolved cultural learning capacities' that make 'cultural group selection' possible. Restrict your help to recipients with the same accent, dress, or religion and you can minimize your chances of being exploited or deceived.

I recommend this book as an introduction to this field. It is comprehensive and clearly written, showing impressive mastery of the modelling and other relevant literature. If I feel ultimately dissatisfied, the reasons lie elsewhere. I just do not think these authors are doing what they claim to be doing, namely explaining why

humans co-operate. When, why, and how did evolving humans begin transcending the limits of non-human primate co-operation? Can we reconstruct the emergence of distinctively human cultural capacities *without assuming those capacities in advance*?

A study of the Chaldeans cannot measure up to this task. It is fascinating to learn, I suppose, that the Chaldeans disapprove when one of their own starts dating a 'Black', a 'Muslim', or a 'Jew' (p. 145) – a stance explained by the authors in terms of 'cultural group selection' theory. Or again, it is interesting to know that when a sum of money is donated during a funeral to a relative of the deceased, the recipient keeps a careful note – returning a marked envelope with the same sum at a subsequent funeral when the roles are reversed (p. 118). But understandably enough – like any other ethnographer furnishing details of this kind – Natalie Henrich assumes from the outset such background phenomena as 'religion', 'the family', 'ethnicity', and 'morality' – structures of co-operation which (from a Darwinian standpoint) cry out to be explained rather than assumed.

The authors can always come up with a theory for each Chaldean finding: kin selection to explain why people favour relatives as partners in a co-operative enterprise; reciprocal altruism (or some other familiar principle) to explain why they sometimes do not favour relatives. But when the authors offer us their own distinctive predictions at a more general theoretical level, the formulations amount to little more than truisms. Here is one that captures the flavour: 'Different human groups will be characterized by different social norms, some of which will be cooperative, some not. Some norms will be maladaptive. Noncultural species will not show this kind of variability' (p. 70). Readers of this journal may object that I am quoting out of context; other predictions offered by the authors are arguably more exciting. But having read the book from cover to cover, I was left feeling underwhelmed.

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