HAZARDS and Hachures of ORIGINS

An Essay.

From the womb of my mother, I was delivered into a suburban world. The forest nearby, or 'the woods', saved us from what Augé (2009) would otherwise call a 'non-place', or Kunstler (1994) a 'geography of nowhere'. But did it really save us? We used this 'natural' landscape, dug trenches into its soil and hammered nails into its trees to build lookout platforms. We would take great pleasure in biking to the dollar store to buy cap guns, using the forest as our terrain of war. Pow pow, you're dead! When I wasn't wearing my military fatigues, I would prance around with my freshly brushed cowboy hat, proud of its superior build quality and confident I could take on any 'Indian' that would cross my path. "Only the strong survive" was something I had learnt from a primary school gym teacher who would often serve this 'fact of life' with a maniacal-laugh pairing. Or it was my uncle, teaching me of the laziness of the poor, that they simply need to "pull they're pants up". Or yet again, my parents professing that respect, income, and even love is earned through hard work; putting their own best efforts to infuse into me the cult of meritocracy.

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A common thread exists within this collection of memories, and it is one that has turned (particularly) white men into tyrants. Finding solace and salvation in war, predation, and competition, these are memories that are founded in long-standing myths about humankind and human nature; myths that have been reproduced through the ages to serve and justify one principal goal: domination. Thomas Hobbes is certainly one of the most notable charlatans within this domain, writing in his Leviathan (1651) that human nature is fundamentally driven by the maxim of bellum omnium contra omnes, of 'war of all against all'. In fact, this doctrine has existed for so long now, and has served to formulate so many systems of oppression throughout the world, that many have come to believe that competition between humans is our state of nature and something that finds its roots within our origins.

As anthropologist David Graeber (2013: 219) posits, "any theoretical term is an implicit statement about human nature". And while this applies to value, kinship, blood, et cetera, origin calls greatly upon this reasoning.

I say this because of the imprint evolutionary sciences have had on narratives about human nature, and most importantly through Darwin's On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life (1859). The use of this work's long-form name is purposeful, pointing to its foreshadowed legacy and part of what it has bestowed upon human society from publication onwards. I am referring to its contributing logic about who and what we are, our instincts and nature as predators vying for power and control, and conversely, how the behaviours of colonists, racists, capitalists, and authoritarians is – well – human nature that dates back to our origins. Let us remember Darwin's popularized principles of evolution: genetic variation and survival of the fittest, the struggle for existence, and the role of heredity.

Let us also remember that this science was quickly socialized, both by Darwin in Descent of Man (1871) and in Huxley's The Struggle for Existence in Human Society (1888/1894), where violence and segregation within social organization was 'naturalized' through these evolutionary findings. This is the social Darwinism of the late 19th century, and that of our present day. If it were not for Darwin, Huxley, and others through time who have fetishized human greed and moral precarity, and conversely, used their status as respected scientists to make such wild claims, Hobbes himself would certainly have dug himself out from six feet under, simply to raise his Leviathan in the air and yell "I told you we humans are rotten!".

And this is the story I and many others have been hearing from our tender childhood through to adolescence, and have ourselves (as adults) been telling, replicating, and contextually adapting until our bitter death. While average people like my gym teacher, my uncle, and my parents have been the strongest voice in perpetuating the dogma of competition as our natural form of sociality, this is a belief system ruled only by elites; the same folks that tell us "competition breeds innovation", "competition increases productivity", and "competition suppresses idleness".

There has been much thought and evidence that defies this dogma, however, and I believe the time is ripe to re-examine what we have been told is natural, original, and essential.

We can look to philosophy, such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's (1851) work on economic mutualism, or Marx (1867/1992) and Engels (1925/1968) dialectical materialism that aligns relationships with real-world conditions such as access to education and health. However, as a greater force to discredit the social Darwinists – -the pièce de resistance, if you will – is Peter Kropotkin's Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution (1902/1989). Like Charles Darwin, Kropotkin was an evolutionary biologist.

His studies in Siberia revealed something quite different: It was sociability and mutual aid that acted as gateways to survival, not competition. Circling these observations back to human society, as Darwin and Huxley had, Kropotkin's Mutual Aid outlined a beautiful history of human collaboration, partnership, and free assembly, from the clan and village community to the guild and medieval city. He showed that while competition and predation exist in the world of elites, statesmen, and priests – those with relative power – the common world is more so defined

by an inclination to help and support each other. In my own studies, where I have spent a great deal of time observing, listening to, and speaking with Middle East and Latin American refugees, I have seldom noticed this alleged tendency toward competition and 'survival of the fittest'.

As I have recently reported to the American Association of Geographers (Parent 2021), it is in these conditions of 'organized abandonment' (Gilmore 2007) that creativity, mutual support, and collectivities have thrived. Beyond this, many of us will have observed such pro-social and egalitarian behaviours within our current pandemic landscape; behaviours that have come together spontaneously, not because a decree has been issued by an authority, but because we fundamentally love, respect, and care for each other. These stories exist everywhere, and far more than those of violence, conflict, and bloodshed.

My intention here has been to disturb how we think of human nature, a fundamental dimension that has served humanity in defining its origins. Importantly, I want to demonstrate how this concept is perhaps less of a truth – a prescription of how and who we are – and more of a discursive tool that has allowed those who hurt to justify their continued harm. As this themed issue asks us to consider our origins, I propose that we examine this concept and the contributions herein with similar discretion. Let us not assume that origins are inert, simple facts, and something to take for granted. Let us acknowledge that origins are elusive, fuzzy, and importantly, do not simply 'live' in the past; a 'sense of origin' is indeed a cultural artefact that crosses temporalities. And finally, let us have the insight and empathy to realize that the concept of origins per se can indeed be imprisoning, hurtful, or prevent us from looking forward to brighter and more equitable futures for all that roam the Earth.

April 2021
City of Montreal
Unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka