

Review: Homo, Hunter-gatherer, Habermas: An Inquiry into Deliberation and Human Nature (PhD by Ramon van der Does, Université catholique de Louvain)

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The dissertation asks a simple but important question – why do people deliberate? The dissertation is well-written and includes both a thorough theoretical analysis and different empirical methods, which demonstrates ambition and innovation. It does not give a definitive answer to the main question, but maybe that is just because simple questions do not imply easy answers.

The dissertation takes an evolutionary approach to political science, an approach introduced about twenty years ago. The main theoretical chapter shows that the theoretical toolkit is workable; the evolutionary analysis of political behaviour is feasible. This tacitly demonstrates that handwaving remarks such as ‘evolution is irrelevant for current behaviour’ or ‘we do not know how ancestral humans lived’ have expired. The theoretical argument for the group hypothesis is elaborate and, in my view, persuasive.

Three empirical chapters each use a different method to test the key hypotheses. Such methodological diversity requires effort and skill and is commendable. While each of the empirical studies has limitations, each also contains critical reflection on the limitations and attempts to make improve-

ments. For example, Chapter 5 reports an experiment that tests the group hypothesis with a sample of Polish internet users. The results did not support the group hypothesis, but there was doubt if the manipulation had worked as intended. The experiment was performed again, with an improved manipulation, which showed similar results. Arduous to perform but also characteristic of science.

With the benefit of hindsight, I think that the two main limitations of the dissertation relate to hypothesis testing. First, it lacked a well-formulated alternative theory or hypothesis. Each empirical chapter tested the group hypothesis. We might have learned more if each chapter had tested it against an alternative hypothesis grounded in standard theory about deliberation. Even if neither hypothesis would receive much support, we could evaluate which was supported more. Second, the empirical tests were not performed on the most suitable data. None of the tests involved measures or observations of face-to-face deliberation among citizens (an unfortunate consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic). Also, I expected the analysis of ethnographic records to provide more insight about deliberation among hunter-gatherers. Surprisingly, one of the findings is that among ethnogra-

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phers there may have been a lack of interest in political decision-making. Neither of these limitations is easily addressed and both invite reflection on how to study the relation between human nature and politics.

Finally, I think the dissertation makes three important contributions. First, it provides evidence that deliberation was widespread among hunter-gatherers and, hence, occurred in the absence of modern political institutions. Second, the findings show no gender difference in deliberation. Third, the findings provide little support for the group hypothesis. One possible interpretation is that our tendencies for deliberation might be less geared towards exclusion than is implied by the group hypothesis. Perhaps human nature does not specifically block deliberation among people from different groups.