The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee

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The Humans species has been singularly succesful, but its success has been marred by two features that threatens to destroy it. One is its prospensity for genocide, the other for its devastation of its environement. As to the former, the author does conflate genocide, as represented by extermination of innocent aboriginess and the recent horror of the Holocaust, with war. His argument that genocide threaten our survival, does not hold water, at least if you take it in a purely physical sense as survival of our species. (On the other hand if you take it in the moral sense, the case is much more forceful). His argument that our degeneration of the environment ultimately impoverishes us, is a well-known lithany of species reduction, which nevertheless alarm us. Diamonds claim that AIDs, drugabuse, cancer, everyday worries, has no effect on our survival, is of course true. Our blind faith in material progress leads us to the brink, and the forces that compel it, seem outside our control. Such lithanies are usually very bleak and coached in a language of unrelieved pessimism, although Diamond sees a ray of hhope in the susrprising interest of the Indonesian government to stall the degradation of its share of New Guinea. Clearly such optimism is in the nature of ,last straws, hopeful as they may be, surely they are just temporary setbacks of the general deluge.

Those are the coknclusions to which the books aims, its compelling interest lies in the delination of what makes us humans tick, a subject that inevitably engages us with its intrinsic interest, and to which breezy prose and a facetuous approach fails to signigficantly dent. The book is written in 1990, and thus fifteen years or so later, inevitably dated, by the omission of recent events, nevertheless the basic picture was clear by 1990, and has in fact been clear for more than a generation before that.

The first basic fact that has to be ascertained, is that humans and Chimpanzees are far more related to each other than they ae to any other animals. In fact they share 98.4 % of their genetic material, a figure that by itself means very little, corresponding to a dating of the cladic splitting to about seven million years ago. (This is on the basis that much genetic change is uniform, has it has little bearing on survival. True the genetic clock is not confined to DNA calibration, more accurate is the testing of the change sof molecules, like that of hemaglobin) In this way humans and chimps are more related than many species, like dogs and foxes, that we think of almost identical. Thus the title of the book.

But humans and chimps do differ significantly, although many of the supposedly dividing characteristics,,like the capacity for language, tool-use and emotions, have turned out to be specious. That difference can be put down to the existence of a developing culture. One may speculate as to the basis for such a cultural difference. the significant difference in brain-size is one, and the erect posture (that nowadays is understood to have predated the increase in brain) is another, freeing hands for manipulation, is another obvious difference. The point is that cultural development is a rather recent phenomenon taking place only

some 50'000 years ago with the rise of the Cro-Magno man. The Neanderthals, so close to us (the controversy whether they belong to a different species, or would have been able to cross-fertilize with man, as donkeys and horses do, remains open), never breahed the cultural satge, thus their lives show now regional differences, nor any historical change.

So what made culture possible? The obvious answer is language. The capacity for language is supposed to be genetically hard-wired in us (at least according to Chomsky and his followers) and it is in fact sobering to reflect that all extant languages, although differing in the wealth of vocabulary, are basically equally sophisticated. (The sophistication of human language is essentially its capacity for self-reference, in the sense of serving as its own meta-language, and its related propspensity for metaphores.) All humans are sophisticated users of language, but not all humans are literate. The development of encoded langauge, and thus the transmission of written documents, serving as a an independant memory-bank, greatly accelerated the propagation and development of culture, is a relatively recent invention, made possible (and necessary?) by the rise of agriculture. The developement of agriculture provides the first essential leap in the history of mankind (the next would be the industrial revolution). For individuals it was a definite set-backs. Health degenerated (studies show that traditional hunter gathers were far more healthy and lived longer lives) partly because of occasional famines, but maybe essentially because of less varied food-sources and overcrwoding and its concominatnt diseases. In fact agriculture is not an inevitable development, until recently the larger part of the Earth were peopled with hunters. It did however lead to a stratified society and to the rise of leisure (which in many cases were just wasted but in a few cases put to transcendent use). The eventual rise of technology and its marriage to industrial production has produced a world in which a small segment of the cultural diversity of mankind has spread and monoplized to the extent that the world has no longer any space for traditional ways of lives.

New Guinea, where the author has spent much time in his hobby as a bird-watcher, provided up to the middle of the 20th century a living fossil of traditioanl cultures. New Guinea, within a very modest geographical extension, did nevertheless provide a significant part of cultural diversity, as represented by the great variety of languages spoken (in fact making up a sizeable fraction of the over-all variety of languages in the world). But alas, the life of traditonal people, do not survive first contacts. Culture changes, by their very nature, but if the gradient is too big, the interchange tendsto become one-sided and ultimately corrupting. The lost Eden of tradiotional ways have by now disappeared. Still one should be wary of sentimentalizing the past and the supposed harmony in which traditional people lived with nature. It is true that the their destruction of species rival the achievemnets we have accomplished, but at a very much lower rate, du to sparse populations and primitive technology. Still it is documented that the great fauna of previously uninhabited islands like New Zealand and Madagascar were obliterated within genartions of colonization. And the spectacular megafauna of the Americas, untocuhed by humans up to the last Ice Age, were hunted to extinction.

The author shows a healthy scepticism as regards the possibility of extra-terretstial life, and especially extra-terrestial intelligence, and above all question why such contacts would be desirable, regerdless of their feasinility. After all an encounter of a more advanced civilization, rather than bringing benefits, would most certainly result in our own

extinction. Thus the experiment of intelligent life, in the sense of cultural life, on earth, must be seen as an isolated inceidene, thus making its tragedy so much more poignant. We really in a sense were introduced to a Garden of Eden, but now there are no more frontiers left. Cynically speaking, the only thing that could make things start over again, would be mass-exterminations of humans on an unpredecented scale, and although we all look back upon our lost youths, and in theory would be willing to do anything to have it back again, in practice it would entail obliyterations, for which we would never have the stomach.

Thus the hopeful note on which the author ends his book rings false. Clearly nothing he has explained and related show any hope for avoiding disaster, except for disaster itself, that might possible set back the clock.

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