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Nested Global Cooperation

Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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If we want to learn better ways to reach the level of planetary cooperation that we urgently need, we might want to learn the mechanisms of how cultural evolution has brought us to where we are now.

The anthropologists Peter Richerson and Rob Boyd (among others) have argued that cultural and genetic evolution are intertwined; they coevolve. Genes influence culture, and culture influences genes. Such gene-culture coevolution has facilitated the transition from small-group collaborative settings to the conditions that enabled cooperation across large groups.¹

Social technologies work best when they tap into our genetically evolved psychological predispositions. For example, social norms emerged from our ability to learn from each other and are a crucial part of cooperation in any small group or large society. Because they harness aspects of our genetically evolved psychology, social norms are very powerful.

In his book *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Have Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth*, Peter Turchin describes how the human species developed its amazing capacity to cooperate in competition with other groups. We developed a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our group's interests, often in peaceful competition with other groups. But we sometimes turn against people who are not part of our group, and we sometimes do so violently.

Evolutionary anthropologist Joseph Henrich shows the crucial role religions played in promoting pro-social behavior across large anonymous societies. The more punishing and the more knowing the "big gods" are, the less people cheat in favor of themselves over distant co-

religionists. The introduction of an afterlife, especially the possibility of going to hell, made cooperation especially successful as Henrich found out. The “selfish wish” to avoid divine punishment makes religious people especially cooperative.²

Across Western societies, religions are in sharp decline and are therefore losing their role in binding people together. There is also no other planetary species (as far as we know) with whom which competition would force us to cooperate as a planetary society.

The only possible pathway therefore seems to be to develop conscious intentionality (or conscious evolution) to design the system of global cooperation.

The art of creating a stable system will involve integrating the tribal impulses of the human psyche and channeling them towards something productive that contributes to collective well-being.

The recent waves of nationalism we have been seeing across Western societies and beyond is a rebellion partly against the economic effects of globalization, but it is at least as much a rebellion against the effects of the dominant liberal (and globalist) cultural paradigm that is perceived by many people as a threat to their collective identity and culture.

Progressives too often put the idea of global identity and global solidarity in opposition to national identity. This will always create opposition and resistance from large parts of our societies who share a deeper sense and attachment to their community and nation. I was therefore happy to read this in Falk’s [essay](#): “An ethos of human solidarity would not eliminate differences but would complement them with a sense of commonality while sustaining their separate and distinctive identities.”

Nicholas Christakis, the director of Yale University’s Human Nature Lab, argues that “[o]ur evolutionary past compels us universally to make a basic obligatory sort of society.” In other words, “...societies have some shapes they cannot assume and some constraints that they must abide by. ...Humans can deviate from the blueprint—but only up to a point. When they deviate too much [...] society collapses.”³ The blueprint determines, for example, that if a society is successful, it will have accommodated humans’ preference for one’s own group.

To many, our naturally evolved ingroup bias is just negative per se. I do believe, however, that it is not so simple. For instance, Emile Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology, already showed “that people who are more tightly bound by ties of family, religion, and local community have lower rates of suicide. But when people escape from the constraints of community, they live in a world of ‘anomie’ or normlessness, and their rate of suicide goes up.”⁴

According to evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, human civilization works best with a nested structure: “Life consists of units within units. In the biological world, we have genes, individuals, groups, species and ecosystems—all nested within the biosphere. In the human world, we have genes, individuals, families, villages and cities, provinces and nations—all nested within the global village.” Within such a nested system, we have to grapple with the inevitable conflicts that arise between lower and higher units: “What’s good for me can be bad for my family. What’s good for my family can be bad for my village, and so on, all the way up to what’s good for my nation can be bad for the global village.”⁵

We have to promote the idea of the nested structure if we want to solve the game theoretical global coordination problems we have as a human species. This would be first step towards a more constructive and less polarized discussion about human organization on earth.

Endnotes

1. Pete Richerson and Rob Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
2. Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).
3. Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2019), 16.
4. Jonathan Haidt, “The Ethic of Globalism, Nationalism, and Patriotism,” *Minding Nature* 9, vol. 3 (2016), 18–24, <https://www.humansandnature.org/the-ethics-of-globalism-nationalism-and-patriotism>.
5. David Sloan Wilson and Dag Olav Hessen, “Blueprint for the Global Village,” *Cliodynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution* 5, no. 1 (2014): 123–157, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xw505xh>.

About the Author



Michael Narberhaus is co-founder of the Smart CSOs Lab and the founder of the Protopia Lab, a think tank and social innovation lab for open dialogue, learning, and innovation on how to redevelop trust within our polarized societies. Previously, he worked for WWF-UK to engage policymakers, business, and civil society in more systemic approaches to transform consumption and production systems towards respecting environmental limits and well-being for current and future generations.

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