

Book reviews

RICHARD E. BLANTON, with LANE F. FARGHER.
How humans cooperate: confronting the challenges of collective action. 2016. xi+423 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. Boulder: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-60732-616-8 paperback \$34.95.



In the mid seventeenth century, England was engulfed in a civil war over a king's right to rule. Thomas Hobbes

wrote *Leviathan* in the midst of this conflict, a book which argued that society was best formed under a commonwealth guided by a single sovereign. Hobbes was among the first Enlightenment philosophers who grappled with understanding how actions could be best coordinated across large, heterogeneous populations. For most of these scholars, monarchy would ultimately be seen as an antiquated institution that was being eroded by reason, democracy and free trade. A new age of modernity was dawning—perhaps returning us to ancient foundations of tribal unity, as Rousseau would argue. Like the advocates for today's sharing economy, the philosophers that laid the foundations for the social sciences in the Western world argued that broad societal cooperation would be enabled by eliminating regulations that enrich the few and disenfranchise the many.

In *How humans cooperate*, Blanton seeks to refute two core principles of Enlightenment thinking. (Four of the book's 13 chapters are co-written with Fargher.) First, he argues that premodern states were not ruled by despots with unilateral control over everyday affairs, and, second, that people do not naturally cooperate without good reason to do so. Blanton begins with this second question by refuting the assertion that humans have an evolved instinct for altruism. Drawing from collective action theory, he argues instead that we are contingent cooperators, rational decision-makers who, within our own cultural milieu, carefully weigh the costs and benefits of cooperation based on the information at hand. People routinely opt in and out of relationships with strangers, and many cooperation studies have emphasised that cooperation breaks down as group membership exceeds a few hundred people. Ruling

with an iron fist alone thus rarely works—you cannot govern effectively without establishing interdependent relationships.

Blanton suggests that institutions can bootstrap cooperation by structuring roles, creating reliable communication channels and standardising the ways in which people interact with each other. Institutions therefore make larger collective groups possible, paving the way to state-level societies that contain large and diverse populations. For Blanton, the primary driver is economic: population growth triggers increased demands for outside production which can only be managed by marketplaces that build trust between producers and consumers. He shows that markets were often construed as liminal spaces with their own sets of regulations and behaviours that broke down social barriers, enforced fairness and curtailed elite attempts to control trade for their own benefit. Functioning markets go hand in hand with the creation of other institutions that lay the infrastructure—both physical and ideological—for strangers to rely on each other.

At the heart of *How humans cooperate* is a database of 30 premodern states that Blanton and Fargher first developed in a widely praised book entitled *Collective action in the formation of premodern states* (2008). Using historical and archaeological data, the authors developed a coding system that assigned a numerical measure to the degree to which the following three main variables were found in each state: public good provisioning, bureaucratisation and control by the ruler. Added together, these variables produced what they called the 'collective action total' (CAT). A higher CAT score means that there were greater investments in public goods, such as roads, irrigation and census-taking, which tied groups together into a more collective body that often limited the power of a ruler to act unilaterally. Athens, perhaps unsurprisingly, topped their list with a CAT score of 52. Yet, the Aztecs—a society that looms large in the Western imagination as being ruled by cruel, power-hungry emperors—was not far behind at 45.

Blanton and Fargher have added more data on these 30 societies over the last decade, testing how different aspects of life enhanced or limited collective action.

Their database is this book's greatest strength, as well as its greatest weakness. Much of *How humans cooperate* considers how states that rely on rural production—or diffused production within a city—invest in infrastructure to connect rural producers and neighbourhoods together. Time and time again, analysis of their database demonstrates that collective action was not only widespread in premodern states but also episodic as conditions changed and contingent collaborators re-calibrated relationships with each other. Much of this infrastructure is comprised of such things as roads and waterways, but Blanton also alerts us to more intangible efforts to create connections, such as shifts towards realistic portraiture and the depictions of quotidian subjects that shortened the perceived social distance between social classes. By relying on their database, Blanton and Fargher can present statistically valid relationships between variables and CAT scores.

The problem with using their existing database is that *How humans cooperate* is not just about state-level cooperation but also the paths that got us there. The cover of the book, a painting depicting commercial exchanges between Plains and Pueblo Indians, illustrates a middle range of cooperation that is often missed by evolutionary psychologists and collective action theorists. Yet it also falls outside of Blanton and Fargher's dataset, which features later examples of state-building in their respective regions. Understanding contingent collaboration since the Pleistocene requires an extension of their database and an adaptation of their methodologies as shifts in mobility, subsistence regimes, population sizes and other factors affected cooperative decision-making. We will also need to be able to generate CAT scores for groups such as pastoral nomads and complex sedentary hunter-gatherers.

How humans cooperate is a provocative book addressed not so much to archaeologists but to those who would choose to ignore wide swathes of our history in constructing models of how we interact with each other in larger groups. With Fargher, Blanton demonstrates that well-functioning institutions are foundational to maintaining collective benefits in both modern and pre-modern states. The erosion of many of these institutions today through union busting or a click on your Uber app is thus a deeply disturbing trend. We can perhaps find correctives in our 5000-year-old tradition of building (and alas dismantling) collectively beneficial states—the past can indeed lead to a better future.

References

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This collection of 25 papers authored by 40 contributors is united by the broad topic of maritime adaptation. The three main themes addressed by the individual chapters are: early marine foraging and adaptive strategies; settlement and subsistence by the sea; and seafaring in historical perspective. Two key regions for comparison are the coasts of Norway and neighbouring Fennoscandia, and the Southern Cone of South America: Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Other sites described and discussed are located on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean (Canada, Spain, Portugal and Ireland), the Arctic Ocean (Alaska and Greenland), the Pacific Ocean (insular British Columbia and the Californian Channel Islands), the Indian Ocean (Sri Lanka) and the Baltic Sea.

The first part of the book addresses the earliest exploitation of marine resources—mammals, birds, fish and molluscs and other invertebrates—for different regions of the world. Based on solid archaeozoological data, humans began to consume marine products in northern Spain at c. 34 000 cal BP (chapter by E. Álvarez-Fernández); in Norway at c. 11 500 cal BP (K.A. Bergsvik *et al.*); in Haida Gwaii (formerly Queen Charlotte Islands, Canada) at c. 11 300 cal BP (D. Fedje & D. McLaren); in southern Portugal at c. 8100 cal BP (J. Soares); and in Tierra del Fuego at c. 7500 cal BP (H.B. Bjerck *et al.*).

The second section of the volume focuses on subsistence strategies based on marine resources. Of

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