

I'm sure some of you remember the old TV show *Gomer Pyle* and his catch phrase "Surprise, surprise, surprise!"

If Gomer were still around, he'd no doubt be hoarse from repetition. Too many surprises these days, and most of them are not really surprising. So I'm not going to dwell whatever the surprise du jour is today. Enough with surprises. Most of them are click-bait headlines anyway, meant to trigger us in some way. A few are indeed real, but spun in one way or another to elicit outrage.

Basically, to stop us from thinking critically.

Over the years, I've come to believe that most what we claim to know is either useful illusion, or a story that benefits someone in some way. These illusions and stories tend to be reductionist, simplified myths and fables. Which is ok, really, until we confuse them with the complexity of reality and history.

Fortunately, we – human beings – can constantly reexamine what we think we know. I think this is a good thing, and something we should always be engaged in. Last month I made the claim that as near as we can tell, cities and hierarchies and class have existed from the beginning of this thing we call civilization.

But I recently ran across an article in *Eurozine* reconsidering the story we've been telling ourselves about the origins of social inequality. That story goes something like this:

In the beginning, humans lived in tiny egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers. Then came farming, which brought with it private property and more people, and then the rise of cities which meant the emergence of civilization. The educated consensus is that once we had large populations, we had to have – had to have – in the words of Jared Diamond - "leaders to make decisions, executives to carry out the decisions, and bureaucrats to administer the decisions and laws." Civilization meant many bad things (wars, taxes, bureaucracy, patriarchy, slavery...) but also made possible written literature, science, philosophy, and most other great human achievements.

One problem – this story is looking like it isn't true. The article asserts that:

Overwhelming evidence from archaeology, anthropology, and kindred disciplines is beginning to give us a fairly clear idea of what the last 40,000 years of human history really looked like, and in almost no way does it resemble the conventional narrative. Our species did not, in fact, spend most of its history in tiny bands; agriculture did not mark an irreversible threshold in social evolution; the first cities were often robustly egalitarian.

Interesting.

The story that we fell from grace – cast out of the garden of our primordial innocence, so to speak - has always constrained our political and social imagination. If the cost of civilization is inequality, then it becomes difficult to imagine eliminating it. The only “solution” would seem to be shrinking the human population and returning to a hunter gatherer mode of existence.

Such a move is obviously a fantasy, and we are left with simply struggling over who gets which slice of the pie, instead of understanding that we used to do things differently.

40,000 years ago is when a robust archeological record begins across Eurasia. Rich burial sites have been uncovered, the bodies of men, women, and children interred with stunning ornaments of carved ivory and shells and animal teeth. The record also shows what can only be called monumental architecture – stone temples and other megalithic structures like those at Gobekli Tepe in present day Turkey - that were temporary ceremonial structures, used once and then torn down or filled in.

And who did this? They weren't farmers. They were hunter gatherers, who followed the vast migrations of deer and bison and woolly mammoth across the steppes. They certainly didn't have agriculture, the supposed precursor to such projects. There are no fortifications in the record, no palaces, no storehouses that suggest a ranked society. And the magnificent burials? They don't seem to be those of kings or queens. Those individuals have visible physical differences, those we would consider to be giants, hunchbacks, or dwarves. Those perhaps touched by some spirit power that made them special.

It appears that much of the time, these people did indeed live in small foraging bands scattered across the land. And then in the annual times of abundance, they came together to trade, engage in complex rituals, and raise up some pretty big structures. These seasonal social structures had different rules and expectations, different laws and religion, each adapted to seasonal conditions. Sometimes these were hierarchical and authoritarian, other times egalitarian, with the understanding that these changed to meet the needs of the time and the people.

As for the “agricultural revolution” that we are taught transformed human social organization worldwide, that too is a reductionist fantasy. Over millennia, various cultures experimented with farming. Some rejected it, or it was a minor part of their food supply, or it simply failed. Some Middle Eastern farming cultures seem to have deliberately developed more egalitarian communities more supportive of a very labor intensive way of life, while their hunter-gatherer neighbors were more hierarchical and warlike.

Evidence is beginning to mount that the first urban centers supported by agriculture – Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, the central valley of Mexico – were egalitarian for centuries, and they existed for a long time without armies, or monuments, or royal burials.

It appears that hierarchal rule is not a requirement for large groups of people to organize themselves by. And the myth that ruling classes cannot be dispensed with except by some kind of upheaval is just that. The authors share one well-documented example: *around 200 AD, the city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico, with a population of 120,000, appears to have undergone a profound transformation, turning its back on pyramid-temples and human sacrifice, and reconstructing itself as a vast collection of comfortable villas, all almost exactly the same size. It remained so for perhaps 400 years. Even in Cortés’ day, Central Mexico was still home to cities like Tlaxcala, run by an elected council whose members were periodically whipped by their constituents to remind them who was ultimately in charge.*

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It seems that up until a few thousand years ago, most human societies were remarkably flexible in their responses to changing needs and conditions. They could be rigid and hierarchical one season, and egalitarian the next, depending on what served. In some cases, each season had different laws and religions. People could use different names in summer and winter, becoming another person.

That flexibility allowed many of these cultures to thrive for millennia.

Now, it is unclear when and how that changed. I personally think that it was the nomadic tribes who imposed authoritarian and ranked social structures on the more egalitarian agriculturalists – enslaving them and essentially creating feudalism, which morphed into capitalism in the West.

Across millennia, human beings have experimented with all kinds of social structures and economies. Those human beings were just as intelligent and creative as we are, and they weren't primitive savages. They just did things differently than we do, and our way is not eternal and ordained by heaven. There are those who would like us to think that way, but mostly because it benefits them.

This business of feudalism and capitalism and kings and queens, and caste and class, is only a few thousand years old, and not the our fate.

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Is capitalism or communism or socialism better? Do we need strong leaders and bureaucrats, or can we self-organize and govern ourselves? Who can run things better, the Democrats or the Republicans, the liberals or the conservatives?

And the answer is sometimes, and it depends, and neither.

The answer is that none of those ideas or systems or ways of organizing offer solutions that are capable of meeting every situation. We need to be able to pick and choose without getting stuck in labels and ideologies.

Communism fails as an organizing principle, but our air and water need to be treated as a communal heritage. Capitalism works quite well as an economic engine, but it sucks at governing and needs to be heavily regulated. Social democracy helps redress economic inequality, but it can't overcome prejudice by decree and is easily manipulated by the powerful. None of these by themselves is sufficient to organize a complex civilization.

This is pretty much where the Western democratic nations ended up, with a mix of strategies and checks and balances. Like all such arrangements, it works until it doesn't.

Which is the moment we find ourselves in. Things have stopped working and it's time to start experimenting again.

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For a number of years, I've only half-jokingly said that on Mondays I'm a communist, Tuesdays I'm a socialist, Wednesdays I'm a liberal, Thursdays I'm a conservative, Fridays I'm a libertarian, Saturdays I'm an anarchist, and I take Sundays off from the whole damn thing and give my brain a rest.

I do sometimes try to wear those hats on those days, because the world is none of those things, and I try not to get stuck in thinking that they are. Each of those has its strengths and weaknesses, and appropriate uses. And the goal is freedom and equality, not to enshrine any single political philosophy and its tribe. Even ours.

We need all those ideas, and all the viewpoints from across the spectrum of human history and experience if we are to create anything resembling a stable society that benefits all.

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The final paragraph of the article says this:

The pieces are all there to create an entirely different world history. For the most part, we're just too blinded by our prejudices to see the implications. For instance, almost everyone nowadays

insists that participatory democracy, or social equality, can work in a small community or activist group, but cannot possibly 'scale up' to anything like a city, a region, or a nation-state. But the evidence before our eyes, if we choose to look at it, suggests the opposite. Egalitarian cities, even regional confederacies, are historically quite commonplace. Egalitarian families and households are not. Once the historical verdict is in, we will see that the most painful loss of human freedoms began at the small scale – the level of gender relations, age groups, and domestic servitude – the kind of relationships that contain at once the greatest intimacy and the deepest forms of structural violence. If we really want to understand how it first became acceptable for some to turn wealth into power, and for others to end up being told their needs and lives don't count, it is here that we should look. Here too, we predict, is where the most difficult work of creating a free society will have to take place.

Perhaps it wasn't civilization that brought inequality and injustice with it, but what we now see as dysfunctional families and communities.

Freedom, equality, and justice, it would seem, begin at home, in our hearts and at our hearths.

Food for thought on this October morning.

Sources:

<https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history/>