

Restoring Healthy Politics: In the Human Tribe of the 21st Century

Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center

www.RickHanson.net

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Caught up in the daily now, it's easy to forget that we are each a living museum, containing the solutions to harsh survival problems faced by our ancestors. Primates emerged around 60 million years ago, tool-manufacturing hominids about 2.5 million years ago, and anatomically modern people nearly 300,000 years ago. For more than 99 percent of this time, our great-etc.-great-grandparents lived in small hunter-gatherer bands; a typical human band had 50 or so members, many of them children. As the brain has tripled in volume over the last several million years, a major driver of its evolution has been the selective advantages of growing *social* capabilities such as empathy, bonding, language, compassion, and cooperative planning.

Hunter-Gatherer Politics

Politics, broadly, is about decision-making, sharing resources, regulating power, and collective action. Bands that were a little better at working together in tough conditions were a little more likely to pass on their genes. The capabilities and inclinations that promoted effective politics *in the social setting of small bands* were gradually woven into our brains.

[As Paul Gilbert and other scholars have shown](#), our ancestors evolved a way of living together that was organized around “caring and sharing” – a remarkable departure from the “holding and controlling” strategies of most other primate species. (The primal impulse toward self-centered domination still found expression in frequently violent competition for scarce resources with other bands.) A politics for the common good emerged naturally from three conditions inherent in hunter-gatherer life:

1. **Common truth** – Living in small groups, the facts were usually obvious: Did the hunt bring back food? Did the leader’s plan work? Is someone eating more than their fair share? Is this person trustworthy – or not?
2. **Common welfare** – Sharing ties of both kinship and mutual dependence, what happened to some happened to all. The self-interest of leaders was tied concretely and immediately to the good of the group.
3. **Common justice** – Leaders had to face the people they led each day, and couldn’t mistreat them with impunity.

In sum, humans are best able to govern themselves when the truth is readily apparent to all, the welfare of the few is tied to the welfare of the many, and leaders bear the consequences of their actions.

Today, nearly eight billion people are spread across the planet, most of us living in ways that are vast departures from our ancient social template. The natural decision-making structure of our species involves about 40 adults. Imagine the

current distribution of humanity represented by 40 people – most of them relatively poor, some of them desperate – staring at each other across an internet “campfire,” trying to figure out what’s best for our human tribe as a whole.

As we seek the greater good in the 21st century, we must ask how we will solve our modern problems – such as great inequalities of wealth and power – with our Stone Age brains.

The Un-Common Good

Life in small human bands was not idyllic, but anthropological studies generally show that inequalities of power and resources were not extreme, certainly when compared to those today. Eight percent of the world’s people now hold 85% of its wealth. In fact, eight individuals have as much combined wealth as half of the human race. In the United States, the top 1% have more money than the bottom 90%. Political influence is linked closely to wealth and is similarly concentrated. In America for instance, there are approximately 120,000,000 households; nonetheless, midway through 2015, almost half of the donations to the various Presidential campaigns had come from just 158 wealthy families.

What has enabled the enormous inequalities in modern societies? You’d think that with the great production of surpluses through agriculture, industrialization, and modern technology, there would be plenty to go around and all would share in the wealth of the human tribe. But in fact the opposite has occurred, fostering terrible individual poverty and misery as well as many brutal conflicts between groups and nations. What happened? Across the world, who decided that living conditions

should be rich for one person in a hundred, comfortable for another ten or twenty, and difficult to awful for everybody else?

These are complex questions with multiple answers, but key among them is this one: *the conditions that fostered healthy human politics – common truth, welfare, and justice – were lost with the shift from hunting-and-gathering to farming-and-herding*. The production of surpluses let leaders concentrate wealth in their own hands, which let them concentrate power as well by hiring warriors to enforce their dominance and priests to justify it. The truth of deals struck behind closed doors could remain hidden in societies with thousands of people. The hunger and poverty of the many did not affect the meals and welfare of the few. Protected by their walls and their guards, the 1% could escape the consequences for the 99% of their rule. And holding-and-controlling was unleashed to become the basis of human governance for the next 10,000 years.

Average living conditions have certainly improved in the past century. Still, inequalities of wealth and power are generally as large today as in Bronze Age or medieval times – since truth, welfare, and justice continue to be un-common:

- In technically complex societies, high-impact actions are easily buried in fine print. Truly fake news spreads virally through social media. Journalists and scientists are attacked as enemies of the people. Awash in information in the digital age, the truth is often hard to find.
- Over the past 30 years, the stagnant incomes of the world's middle class have not affected the meteoric rise in wealth of the top 1%. What has happened to us has

not happened to them, and what has happened to them has definitely not happened to us.

- Outside of democracies, governing elites are rarely held to account. Even in democracies, leaders and legislators can usually avoid dealing with the wounded soldiers, people without healthcare, or impoverished children that are the results of their actions or inactions.

I'm not saying that all those with wealth and power have gained it unfairly or ignored the common good. Wealthy benefactors have brought many wonderful things into being, and some wise and large-hearted leaders have made great contributions to humanity.

This said, wealth and power have been used routinely throughout history to hide the facts, decouple private gains from public welfare, and shield leaders from justice – all to gain even more wealth and power.

Good Governance in the Internet Age

I came of age politically in the 1960s, and have seen in my lifetime the beginnings of a promising restoration of the three conditions of healthy human governance.

Technology and education have increased access to facts, knowledge, and truth. In some countries, tax policy and business regulation have slowed the concentrations of capital. The gradual spread of democratization has increased the holding of leaders to account. We have been leaning in the right direction, and the greater sharing of truth, welfare, and justice has been beneficial to many, many people around the world.

On the other hand, recently we've seen a swing back in the other direction, including fundamentalist or authoritarian attacks on a free press and factuality itself, attempts to separate the wealth of the few from the prosperity of the many, and a movement toward pseudo-democracies in which leaders can lie freely and enrich themselves and their cronies. Meanwhile, billions of people live in crushing poverty as the planet gets hotter every day.

We are at a crucial tipping point in the course of human history. Things could go either way. What can we do?

For starters, we live in a time in which knowledge is increasingly distributed and democratized – and this could foster the same for wealth and power. Gathering around a fire, in the small bands of our ancestors the many could speak up and stand up to the few. These days individuals can join together to do the same, though our campfires look like social media, town hall meetings, and the public square. Gathering around them in our own ways today, we can speak up and stand up for facts, for the general welfare, and for justice. And we can call out and name and frankly shame those who violate the basis of any healthy relationship – so fundamental that we teach it to our children – which is to tell the truth and play fair.

Countless nonprofit organizations are also pursuing the common good, from neighborhood groups to multinational NGOs (e.g., Amnesty International). Some of them integrate science, mental health practices, and social policy, such as the [Compassionate Mind Foundation](#) and the [Greater Good Science Center](#). Their work is vital, and imagine a world without it. Nonetheless, in general they could work

together a lot more effectively. While profit-seeking companies compete in the marketplace, at the political level they are shrewdly cooperative, combining their money to pay lobbyists, donate to political campaigns, and influence policy in corrupt ways. Meanwhile, prosocial organizations rarely pool their resources at the scale necessary to stand up the forces of wealth and power. Imagine the results of thousands, even millions of non-profits committing 1% of their revenues and hundreds of billions of dollars each year for a generation, aimed at a single shared and highly leveraged purpose, such as relentlessly exposing corruption, promoting true democracy, or protecting the rights of girls and women.

The hunter-gatherer conditions that promoted a politics that served the many, not just the few, are no longer simply given to us today. We must *create* them. It is up to each one of us to forge a common truth, welfare, and justice. It will not be easy. For most of the past 10,000 years, ordinary people had no chance against the elites and their soldiers. In the dictatorships of one kind or another that still prevail in much of the world today, they still have little chance. But where there is genuine democracy, at least we have a decent chance. It is up to us to use it.