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Book Review of, The Evolution of Human Cooperation: Ritual and Social Complexity in Stateless Societies

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The Evolution of Human Cooperation: Ritual and Social Complexity in Stateless Societies. CHARLES STANISH, 2017. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. xiii + 336 pp. \$110.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-107-18055-0.

In this significant book, Stanish builds a model of how complex stateless societies solve collective action problems to benefit their members in the absence of coercive leadership; not in the absence of leadership, but in the absence of coercive leadership. The model is framed by Game Theory, which he recasts as Anthropological Game Theory, and Collective Action Theory, making the claim that humans are conditional cooperators. Crucial to successful and sustainable cooperation is a “ritualized economy”: an economy with “rules of co-operative economic behavior...[encoded]...in a variety of *ritual* practices. This economy, structured by ritual, enculturated by habit, and culturally transmitted across generations, is the means by which the emergent properties of co-operation inherent in social interaction lead to ‘strong’ forms of co-operation (p. 7)”.

He accomplishes this in eight chapters, the first introducing the argument, and key notions such as complex stateless societies and the ritualized economy. He distinguishes among simple stateless societies – hunter-gatherer bands – complex stateless societies, and states. Complex stateless societies are significantly larger than bands, contain both kin and non-kin who cooperate over long time periods, often on projects such as the construction of “special places” or monuments, but in the absence of coercive leadership. He also introduces Game Theory and the Behavioral Economics’ concepts central to his argument.

Chapter Six succinctly summarizes the model, which is comprised of nine claims: In the shift from egalitarian to complex stateless societies, people are not forced to adopt hierarchies; increased population density is a necessary precondition that permits people to create complex forms of cooperation; individuals benefit from participating in cooperative groups; the cooperative group creates leadership positions lacking coercive power to meet group interests; group membership is fluid; successful groups solve free rider problems and allocate payoffs for group participation by developing appropriate norms and behaviors; “they assure success...[by]... ritualizing production and exchange (p. 167)”; the strategies that produce group success persist and spread either through imitation by other groups, or the group’s absorption; successful groups reinforce and advertise their success by creating “special places” (e.g.. monuments) on the landscape; and “Group formation is cyclical. There is no inevitability in this process (p. 168).”

The intervening chapters (Two through Five) develop the theoretical and empirical bases for these claims. In Chapter Two Stanish critiques classical economics, economic anthropology, and the concept of the rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing actor of classical economics, showing how this conception was set against the apparently irrational actors in “primitive” – i.e. non-western, non-state -- economies. They are rational, but the premises of their rationality are different. Chapter Three uses game theory to develop the argument that humans are conditional cooperators. The fourth chapter examines the history and theoretical role of coercion in social theories, using Hayden’s aggrandizer theory as an influential modern example of coercion-based theories. Chapter Five is a lengthy explanation of the “ritualized economy”, which is a form of economy not accommodated by standard economic theories. One of his conundrums is what to call it, “ritualized” is unsatisfactory, given its religious connotations in English, but the word best captures his sense. He again defends this choice in the last chapter, the Epilogue, where he revisits the concept of a ritualized economy. Chapter Seven is

the archaeological test; he applies the model to archaeological data, first to the relationship between population growth and non-state complex societies, and second, making predictions about the earliest “special places”. He tests the model against four case studies: Andean South America (where he conducts research), the Neolithic Near East, the Archaic in Eastern North America, and Neolithic Northwestern Europe.

The model is based on the voluminous ethnographic literature on non-state complex societies, but particularly of Melanesia; His thinking is heavily influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski. Stanish importantly revives the debate about the initial causes of permanent leadership: was it managerial or coercive? His answer is managerial, but unlike earlier theories, it arises bottom up at the behest of group members, not bottom down from the action of proto-elites. He promises in his next book to tackle how we went from that to top-down coercive power. The ritualized economy concept should force a productive re-evaluation of the political economies of non-state societies.

The book is intellectually stimulating, dense, but accessible and well written. The scholarship is impressive. It is not without flaws. His arguments rely too heavily on simple oppositions; I think, for example, there is a lot more gray between non-coercive and coercive leadership than his critique of Hayden allows. But hopefully it will spark useful debate and research.