## PEOPLE AND PLACE

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# COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE THEORY OF ETHNIC NEPOTISM: A REVIEW OF FRANK SALTER (ED.) WELFARE, ETHNICTY AND ALTRUISM

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New research shows that, in general, member of multiethnic societies are less likely to behave altruistically towards each other than are members of more ethnically homogeneous societies. But the question of how we should explain these finding remains open. Does the theory of ethnic nepotism provide an adequate explanation, or should we rather look to the cultural processes supporting feelings of national solidarity?

There are two questions that contemporary social scientists do not often ask: What is the basis of social solidarity? And does biological relatedness play a part in it?

The first of these is crucial. Many goals can be achieved more effectively if we act collectively and some can never be achieved by individuals acting alone. Collectively we can fulfill long-term treaty obligations to other nations, care for war veterans, build roads and hospitals, provide for defence, fight bush fires, rescue disaster victims, and try to protect the natural environment: as individuals we cannot do any of these things. But collective action depends on altruism.1 In some cases this may be the limited altruism of performing a favour for someone today in the hope that they will return it at some time in the future. But in extreme circumstances it can mean devoting one's life to public service or even dying for the welfare of others.

Behaviour of this kind cannot be explained by economic self interest and it becomes even harder to understand when we remember that it is always vulnerable to cheats and freeloaders, spongers who take advantage of the sacrifices of others but make no contribution of their own. Cheats are not restricted to welfare bludgers. They include powerful elites (individuals and firms) who exploit others at will, as well as many cashed-up

cosmopolitan professionals who profit from social capital provided by locals and then move on, never paying their dues to any group at all.

People are more likely to behave altruistically if they can trust other people not to exploit them.<sup>2</sup> Inter-personal solidarity means a general expectation that we can trust other people to make a contribution to the common good (if and when they can) and that we can trust them not to take selfish advantage of the sacrifices we make for them. Without it collective action is difficult, if not impossible.

What makes us trust each other? While propinguity may not necessarily lead to trust, it does allow us to know each other and, through assessments of personal reputation, judge whom we can safely trust.<sup>3</sup> In small communities cheats can either be excluded or shamed into cooperation. In mass societies, with their multitudes of unknown strangers, these strategies are not possible. Here solidarity must have other origins. For collective action to be possible we must be persuaded that taking risks to promote the welfare of strangers is honourable and safe (rather than foolish and dangerous). What persuades us? What creates solidarity at the national level? It is curious that there has been so little recent work on this question.4

Political philosophers are happy to preach about the sacrifices we ought to

make for others; there is no shortage of pleas to share with all human kind, work for world peace, and care for the Earth. Moralists argue that we should treat strangers in distant lands with the same concern as we should feel for our neighbours.<sup>5</sup> But there is little empirical work on the circumstances in which this might become a safe and effective way for us to behave. Literature of this kind tends to ignore the role of solidarity and to start and end with normative exhortation.

If the theory that national solidarity promotes trust and thus supports altruism holds, we would predict that in states where national sentiment was weakened by religious, class, tribal or ethnic divisions, trust would be lower and interpersonal altruism between strangers under strain. Is there any evidence that we could use to test this hypothesis?

A recently published book edited by Frank Salter (Welfare, Ethnicity and Altruism<sup>6</sup>) contains a wealth of data on the negative association between ethnic diversity within states (and sub-regions of states) and levels of spending on welfare and other public goods. But none of the contributions are based on the theory of socially created national solidarity; rather they rest on the controversial, genetically-based, theory of ethnic nepotism. In Nationhood and Political Theory Margaret Canovan argues that the nation is not a natural entity formed from common bloodlines but that the veil of imagined kinship and the pretense of naturalness help nations to cohere. For most of the authors in Salter's book the kinship has to be real.

From their perspective, altruistic behaviour is to be explained in terms of kin-based altruism. What does this mean? If we assume that our individual interests are identical to our 'interest' in our inclusive fitness, altruism is explained in

terms of our success in propagating our genes. For example, each of our children carry half of our genes; those of a sister carry a quarter of our genes. You would do more to further your inclusive fitness if you helped your sister to bring up three children than if you had one child of your own. The children of your first cousin have one eighth of your genes. If you helped her to bring up six children you would also have done more for your inclusive fitness than if you had had one child yourself.

The concept of inclusive fitness has been crucial in explaining the altruistic behaviour of non-human animals towards their close kin. The contributors in Salter's volume draw on this work and, as many others have done, extend it to humans. But they take the theory of kin-based altruism beyond the relatively close circle of members of extended families and apply it to ethnic groups as a whole. Thus the actions of the patriot who makes sacrifices for his country are explained, not in terms of national identification and a patriotic love of land and people, but in terms of inclusive fitness, provided of course that his compatriots are genetically related co-ethnics. Most of the authors accept the theory of ethnic nepotism and draw on it to test the hypothesis that, in ethnically diverse societies, people will be less willing to contribute to public goods and to support social welfare than they are in ethnically homogeneous societies, because they are reluctant to help people to whom they are not genetically related. Why? Because it would increase the inclusive fitness of others while diminishing their own.

This new perspective for thinking about human society draws on biology and genetics and goes under various names (sociobiology, human ethology, evolutionary psychology). It is unpopular

in most social science circles. Consider, for example, the overwhelmingly adverse reaction to E.O. Wilson's work on sociobiology in the mid 1970s. <sup>10</sup> But one does not need to subscribe to the theory of ethnic nepotism to find the data in Salter's book deeply interesting.

In 2000 The Australian Financial Review reported the following advice from the CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland: if you want to wind down the welfare state in any country, bring in more immigrants. In the banker's own words:

One reason for advocating more relaxed immigration polices — more openness to people who want to move to wherever there are opportunities — is that it is impossible to sustain a wealth redistribution welfare state with open immigration. So, if one wants to get rid of the welfare state, one ought to be promoting an open immigration policy.<sup>11</sup>

The research reported in *Welfare, Ethnicity and Altruism* suggests that the banker is right. Some of the authors argue that the negative effects of ethnic diversity on collective support for social welfare are slight<sup>12</sup> or that, depending on how you measure ethnicity, the effects are strong,<sup>13</sup> though possibly limited to transfer payments rather than to expenditure on public goods. Others report that ethnically diverse nations give less in foreign aid than ethnically homogeneous ones.<sup>14</sup>

Some, however, point to the difficulty of defining an ethnic group; ethnicity may be either latent or mobilised and the relevant boundaries of a group may shift. Tatu Vanhanen takes an essentialist approach: 'It is true that cultural characteristics differentiate ethnic groups but cultural markers vary from case to case, whereas it is common for all ethnic groups that they share common ancestry.

Therefore, I think that it is justified to define ethnic groups as extended kin-groups'.<sup>15</sup> But others argue that people have many possible social linkages and that observable ethnic divisions appear and fade in response to poverty and insecurity. For them an ethnic identity is something that we can chose as circumstances change.<sup>16</sup> Indeed Roger Masters argues that ethnic diversity is not the cause of miserly contributions to welfare but an excuse for them.<sup>17</sup>

The strengths of this book lie in the large arrays of data that it presents, the diversity of points of view included (albeit among those sympathetic to sociobiology) and in the clarity with which most of it is written. The editor's own contributions are particularly interesting. In his final chapter, for example, he points out that the common analogy between welfare and kinship invites a biological approach. 18 Why is it that public figures who are happy to talk about the family of the nation are so reluctant to ask whether the familial feelings they admire have any biological basis? This chapter is unusual in that it does provide a critique of the mainstream political science literature. as well as an overview of the author's preferred approach.

People who are sceptical about the role of inclusive fitness and ethnic nepotism in explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the welfare state will nonetheless find the data fascinating. While different authors have different analytical approaches the general conclusion holds: observable ethnic diversity is associated with less support for altruistic collective action, either at the local level (in various jurisdictions within the United States)<sup>19</sup> or at the national level.

We could explain this finding using the theory of ethnic nepotism but the theory of national solidarity is equally plausible. It is even possible to imagine a theory that combined both, but the main starting point of such a theory would be the argument that nations are social constructs. They are territorial communities of strangers who love the 'sacred landscape'20 of their homeland and, in a sense, love each other.21 This love is usually referred to with the more neutral word, identification, but we should remember that it is emotion which nourishes trust and supports collective action. Democratic nation states can enfold people of mixed ancestries without endangering trust and solidarity provided that they do this cautiously and ensure that that newcomers join their new society not just in a formal, legalistic sense but also in their hearts.<sup>22</sup> With the theory of national solidarity, identification with a national people and hence communal altruism can be fostered by cultural beliefs; genetic relatedness might contribute to identification but identification need not depend on it.

Salter and his co-authors have produced a provocative volume, worth reading both by sociobiologists and by sceptics. But further research is needed to establish whether shared ancestry is indeed a precondition for altruism or whether communitarian solidarity will provide a workable basis for it, irrespective of the presence or absence of genetic relatedness. We could, for example, look for societies which are relatively ethnically homogeneous but riven by class or religious divisions and compare their commitment to welfare with that of societies which are ethnically heterogeneous but relatively untroubled by other types of divisions.

Nonetheless the data assembled in this book should be sufficient to make post-national, enthusiasts for ever-growing diversity pause a little to think about some of the possible costs of their enthusiasm. The rest of us can ask whether the family of the nation is a metaphor rather than a description. Indeed if we live in a nation which is already ethnically diverse we must hope that it is a metaphor. We need the fictive kinship created by a common sense of peoplehood to work as well as any biological kinship certified by DNA.

### References

- By altruism I mean actions that benefit others without any immediate on-the-spot recompense for the actor. He or she may hope for favours to be returned in the future but has no guarantee that this will happen.
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- <sup>3</sup> K. Betts, 'The evolution of social capital: on the origins of the social contract', *The Social Contract*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1998, pp. 252-261 <www.thesocialcontract.com/archives/html>
- Miller op. cit. is an exception. So too is M. Canovan, Nationhood and Political Theory, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK, 1996 and M. J. Sandel, Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.
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- <sup>7</sup> Canovan, op. cit., pp. 70, 75
- The term inclusive fitness refers to the 'idea that fitness is measured by the success of one's genes, whether possessed by the individual or by that individual's relatives' <a href="https://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0767425944/student-view0/chapter8/glossary.html">https://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0767425944/student-view0/chapter8/glossary.html</a> (accessed September 2004).

- See for example T. Vanhanen, 'An exploratory study of the relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and welfare politics', and M. Butovskaya et al. 'Urban begging and ethnic nepotism in Russia: an ethological pilot study', in Salter 2004, op. cit., pp. 90, 29.
- This is well described in U. Segerstråle, Defenders of the Truth: The Battle for Science in the Sociobiology Debate and Beyond, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.
- Jerry Jordan quoted in 'They Say: Immigration will help dismantle the welfare state', *The Australian Financial Review*, 7 March 2000, p. 20
- <sup>12</sup> See Vanhanen, op. cit., p. 103
- <sup>13</sup> S. K. Sanderson, 'Ethnic heterogeneity and public spending: testing the evolutionary theory of ethnicity with cross-national data', in Salter op. cit., p. 80
- <sup>14</sup> W. A. Masters and M. S. McMillan, 'Ethnolinguistic diversity, government, and growth', in Salter, op. cit.
- Vanhanene, op. cit., p. 90. See also Salter, 'Ethnic diversity, foreign aid, economic growth, population policy, welfare, inequality, conflict, and the costs of globalism: a perspective on W. Master's and M. McMillan's findings', in Salter, op. cit., p. 154.
- <sup>16</sup> Masters and McMillan, op. cit., pp. 123, 125, 127
- <sup>17</sup> R. D. Masters, 'Why welfare states rise and fall: ethnicity, belief systems, and environmental influences on the support for public goods', in Salter, op. cit., p. 263
- <sup>18</sup> F. Salter, 'The evolutionary deficit in mainstream political theory of welfare and ethnicity', in ibid.
- J. N. Schubert and M. J. Tweed, 'Ethnic diversity, population size and charitable giving at the local level in the United States', in ibid.
- The phrase is Scruton's. See R. Scruton, The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 55
- ibid., p. 55 and passim
- See K. Betts, 'The people and the population: immigration and social cohesion', *The Sydney Papers*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2001, pp. 48-60