Finding Fairness: From Pleistocene Foragers to Contemporary Capitalists


REVIEWED BY THOMAS E. EMERSON

In a world increasingly focused on specialization and dominated by intellectual silos, it is unusual to find a scholar who is willing to breach these barriers and explore the essential foundations of human society. However, this is just what Jennings undertakes in this volume, offering a unique synopsis of eight million years of humanity’s biological, psychological, and social evolution through the lens of the embedded concept of fairness. This is no small task, tracing a social norm from *Australopithecus* to Occupy Wall Street advocates. While situating fairness as culturally constructed and situationally fluid, he asserts that the concept has deep roots and continues to the present day to be informed by five behavioral criteria that include “(1) familial hierarchy; (2) fierce egalitarianism; (3) widespread, frequent collaborations; (4) within-group trust and allegiance; and (5) task-based leadership” (3).

Contending that fairness becomes hardwired early in hominin evolution, the volume traces its development and transfiguration through a series of great biosocial transitions—attaining humanity, sedentism, village life, urbanism, imperialism, and global capitalism—in six core chapters. Jennings’ approach of abductive validation brings together a wide range of ethological, ethnographic, archaeological, and social truisms that serve as exemplars in illuminating the impacts of observed socioevolutionary changes that occur in increasingly complex societies. Each of these transitions is illustrated with four case studies (ranging widely through time and space from Natufians to rubber collectors in the Brazilian Amazon) that seek to illustrate the social impact of fairness and its transformation as well as the wide range of diverse options societies have implemented to deal with these challenges.

A number of characteristics are said by Jennings to be common to all complex societies, including a strong within-group preference (homophily); a measured equality that dominated most of human history; increased localization resulting from sedentism; increased levels of globalization in exchange systems that served to transform local units in new and unexpected ways; and a tendency to aggregate into larger and larger population clusters while retaining numerous small units that often re-emerged when the clusters (be they state or empire) collapsed.

To fully grasp the arguments in this volume, readers need to pay close attention to the semantics that Jennings employs in his argument, especially regarding fairness. “Fairness” is a slippery term because it is wedded to a specific context with origins lying within the nuclear family. Through time, humans will expand and manipulate this context to deal with scalar stress through the creation of extended families, sodalities, or even the state, with decreasing success. Fairness is situationally defined and implemented very much in terms of an Us versus Them context: one has no obligation to be fair to outsiders. Jennings’ case studies detail how this concept can be used in polities that seek to engender in-group cohesion by generating conflicts with outsiders (e.g., the Inca and Roman empires). The various criteria for judging within-group fairness—that is, equality (equal shares for all), need, and equity (shares according to contributions)—can set the stage for generating social change, and their shifting definitions (as in capitalism, discussed below) can be considered as primary indicators in evaluating levels of inequality.

The key challenges to fairness in a socioevolutionary scenario harken back to the maintenance of what Jennings defines as a fierce egalitarianism and the continuance of cohesion through in-group trust. The main culprits threatening the maintenance of fairness come via the impact of scalar stress resulting from the decreased mobility and increased population density of large aggregations that accompany the advent of sedentism. Increased population density of course puts stress on maintaining internal family autonomy, and societies have often reacted by establishing larger fictive family groups and sodalities that crosscut the larger village context. Such
aggregations should, in terms of effectiveness, generate hierarchical leadership from earlier forms of task-based hunter-gatherer leadership. Jennings argues, however, that for much of human history the development of community-wide rituals involving feasting and religious rites and suprafamily social groups, combined with leadership practices focused on asserting the community’s welfare vis-a-vis other groups, served to dampen the emergence of internal hierarchies and elites.

Running through the story of humanity’s historically shifting patterns of social structures are the critical roles of political, social, and economic institutions (defined as the acknowledged rules of behavior). Social change is said to be generated by the peoples’ rational recognition of the failure of existing institutions and their search for modifications that are fairer. This process is laid out to explain, for example, the emergence of global capitalism. Earlier social and economic changes had mostly dismantled the face-to-face interactions of kin and sodalities that supported existing economic transactions. Recognizable difference in power and wealth were increasingly appearing in state-level societies along with a shifting social awareness that “equality of outcome” was moving toward notions favoring the “equality of opportunity.” Jennings proposes the increasing importance of the marketplace in facilitating important cross-community economic interaction and suggests that the failure of governmental agency to assure the equality and equity of the socioeconomic process led the populace to realize that, for them, the invisible hand of the marketplace was the fairest available option. In other words, capitalism emerged by default rather than design.

Finding Fairness is a provocative account of the evolution of human society framed in concepts of fairness as detailed at the beginning of this review and oft repeated in the volume’s text. Jennings’ approach is fundamentally adjunctive, presenting a series of observed and documented archaeological, ethnological, and biological events that require an explanatory hypothesis. That explanatory validation is drawn from primate and hominid behavioral and biological studies. It lays out a hypothetical model of how humans may react to the scalar stress induced by such factors as population aggregation, increased density, energized crowding, and interactions with nongroup members. For Jennings, those responses are couched in a system of rationality and fairness. However, he often acknowledges social change as the potential result of the “unexpected consequences” of presumably rational decision-making by human agents. This inherent contradiction between rational agency and unintended results seems to be an unresolved issue in many of his explanations of social change and might be seen as a challenge to the use of rational explanations to identify the causality of such change.

There also seems to be a behavioral discontinuity in the actions of the top-down versus bottom-up impact of fairness. While the general populace is given an evolved operational agency in promoting the rules of fairness, the elite (or the potential oppressors) seem to be somewhat free of that inbred fairness behavior and, in fact, when left on their own seem set on a path to self-aggrandizement. One would expect a universal, biologically evolved behavior with thousands of years of reinforcement to have a greater impact on the behavior of the leaders. Throughout the reading of this volume, it often occurred to me that it could have been as aptly titled Seeking Self-Interest—a mode of behavior that seems to me to fulfill the behavioral attributes of within-group preference and reciprocal interactions with others to ensure their future cooperation that Jennings attributes to fairness.

First and foremost, Finding Fairness is an all-encompassing narrative seeking to weave together and account for the immense diversity, uniformity, ambiguity, contradiction, continuity, and patterning observed in human history. This effort reaches far beyond the mere accumulation of facts (for which there are often few available); it requires its creator to be imaginative, to delve into the realm of often elusive plausibility, and, moreover, to explore avenues that are often on the fringe of current mainstream scholarship. Jennings accomplishes all of this and tells a gripping story of the biological and social evolution of our ancestors. For scholars and general readers who are fascinated with grand histories, Jennings’ tale is a worthwhile and thought-provoking read.

Thomas E. Emerson
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Champaign, Illinois
tee@illinois.edu