

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Ultra Society: how 10,000 years of war made humans the greatest cooperators on earth*, Beresta Books, LCC, Connecticut, 2016 by Peter Turchin

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Ultra Society is the most recent book by Peter Turchin, the polymath evolutionary scientist, and author of numerous scholarly and popular works on cultural and social evolution. Let me begin the review by stating that Turchin is one of the most underrated scholars in the social sciences and that, like everything else he has written, *Ultra Society* is replete with insights and is an enjoyable and worthwhile read. Like any good reviewer, however, I have some critical comments which I will postpone for the conclusion of the review.

Ultra Society is about the origins of large-scale human cooperation. It is this, according to Turchin, that is the key distinguishing characteristic of our species. The first couple of chapters do a good job of explaining how cooperative traits came to be selected by natural selection, despite putting individuals at a disadvantage. Here Turchin summarizes the shortcomings of arguments that rely solely on “a selfish gene” or kin-selection, and provides an elegant and readable summary of the newly emerging scholarly consensus on the significance of group selection.

Turchin makes the point that it is the ratio of within and between group variation in comparison to the strength of selection within or between groups that determines whether or not altruistic traits will be selected for. If selection within the group is dominant then cooperators may be weeded out, as they will be less successful than defectors. But more intense competition between groups will tend to select groups with a higher share of cooperative types.

Ultra Society really takes off when Turchin begins to investigate the transition from egalitarian, small-scale societies, in that cooperation could be enforced through norms and shaming, to hierarchical, large-scale, agricultural societies which enforce

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cooperation through formal systems of law and government. Turchin's explanation for this transition is warfare.

According to Turchin, warfare was crucial for the selection of societal traits promoting large-scale cooperation. Reviewing the debate about the level of violence or warfare among hunter gatherers, Turchin sides with those who argue that early humans experienced high rates of murder and death through violence (though he agrees with those critics of [Pinker \(2011\)](#) who argue that the transition to agriculture may have brought about an intensification of warfare).

For Turchin, war is important because it is a principle engine of cultural evolution. It is a way for more cooperative groups to wipe out or outcompete less cooperative groups. As he emphasizes, scale matters greatly in warfare. Agriculturalists always defeat non-agriculturalists in the long run (at least when the terrain is suitable for agriculture). And, through conquest and ethnocide, they transmit the values that encourage cooperation in larger-scale, agrarian societies. This is a process of destructive creation that has promoted the spread of cooperative values and norms.

Another prominent theme in *Ultra Society* is egalitarianism. Warfare and equality are closely related in Turchin's argument. The title for Chapter 5 is "God Made Men, but Sam Colt Made Them Equal." In fact, as Turchin narrates, it was the prevalence of distance weapons such as bows and arrows going back into prehistory that served as a powerful equalizing force. Whereas among our primate cousins, a single alpha male is often able to dominate an entire troop through superior physical strength, primitive distance weapons enabled the members of hunter-gatherer bands to easily group together and depose despotic leaders, thereby ensuring a comparatively equal distribution of rewards among band members. Distance weapons, according to Turchin, also reduced the importance of selection on physical traits and made coalition building more significant. For these reasons, early human societies were both more egalitarian than are groups of chimpanzees and displayed less strict distinctions between the genders.

The development of new weapons such as the invention of the chariot and cavalry, however, brought about scale economies that enabled the rulers of settled agrarian polities to build more powerful and more hierarchical states. Turchin calls this development the rise of God Kings and, as this term implies, these societies were extremely inequalitarian.

Building on the ideas of Karl Jaspers and Robert Bellah, Turchin argues that the oppression associated with these hierarchical states led to the emergence of axial age philosophies and religions that emphasized the natural equality of man.

These developments illustrate what Turchin calls the "Zigzags of Human History." Inequality declined as humans evolved from primates into foraging bands, then it increased with the rise of agrarian empires. The Axial Age religions, in contrast, were a cultural innovation that sparked a movement back to more egalitarian societies. These religions helped to produce more stable societies by rectifying the worst excesses of the rulers of large agrarian empires. And in the modern period, Turchin sees similar developments such as in the contemporary backlash to high levels of inequality in the west.

Ultra Society is full of insights and interest. At 266 pages including references and notes, it is a quick read. The strong points of *Ultra Society* stem from the author's

knowledge of both the evolutionary and the historical literature. Eminently comfortable in both fields, Turchin can weave together a convincing narrative that doesn't strain credulity when he moves beyond his area of specialization.

What then are its shortcomings? Having praised *Ultra Society*, I will now commit the cardinal sin of book reviews and criticize an author for not having written the book this reviewer wishes that they had. Due to its brevity *Ultra Society* falls short of providing a definitive account of the evolutions of human and political evolution.

Turchin chose to self-publish *Ultra Society*. This has been successful in some respects. The book is a nicely produced and inexpensive paperback. It has been carefully edited and proofread. It reads extremely well. However, while *Ultra Society*'s writing style and tone suggests it is aimed at a popular rather than a scholarly audience, I wonder how well it will do reaching such a popular audience.

Furthermore, given that the book is a short one, the choice of what Turchin chooses to focus his attention on sometimes seems guided by his current readings and interests. Turchin goes off on several tangents such as criticizing the notion of a Western Way of War, associated with Victor Davis Hanson who argues that western societies developed a distinctive form of warfare based on hand-to-hand combat (Hanson 1989). Here, Turchin makes some good and interesting points but, as he does not fully develop his criticism, a reader who is familiar with the literature on ancient and medieval warfare is left unsatisfied. Similarly, he cites Robert Drews's notion that hoplite warfare emerged to combat steppe cavalry but he does not make it clear that this conjecture is highly speculative (Drews 2004). Elsewhere, *Ultra Society* makes some important and original points but does not develop them fully due in part, to, one suspects, a desire to maintain a popular and chatty style. The discussion of Enron and the changed corporate culture of the 1980s, for example, reads as somewhat superficial. The analysis of precisely how technological changes led to the formation of more hierarchical states in the ancient near East is similarly suggestive. In both case, the book would have benefited from a more sustained and detailed argument and analysis.

Turchin's argument could also have benefited from an engagement with some of the ideas developed by F.A. Hayek in his later writings (Hayek 1979, 1988). Like Hayek, Turchin emphasizes the importance of egalitarian instincts and cooperative norms among hunter-gatherers. But, whereas Hayek sees these norms as atavisms, at odds with, and potentially damaging to, large-scale market-orientated societies, Turchin appears to be much more optimistic about the ability of modern societies to be made consistent with our evolved egalitarian preferences. I would like to have seen Turchin tackle these arguments head-on.

None of this takes away from the fact that *Ultra Society* is a very good book, one I would recommend to anyone looking to better understand societal development over the long-run. It is not yet a definitive account of cultural evolution and the emergence of modern societies but perhaps Peter Turchin will write such a book in the future.

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