

Warlike and Peaceful Societies

Interview with Agner Fog by Ricardo Lopez

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[This interview on YouTube](#)

Ricardo (00:00:00):

Hello, everybody. Welcome to a new episode of [The Dissenter](#). I am your host Ricardo Lopez, and today I am joined by Dr. Agner Fog. He is associate professor of computer science at the Technical University of Denmark. Dr. Fog does research in evolutionary anthropology, cultural anthropology, social systems, and computer science. His current project is theory of cultural change based on evolutionary psychology evolutionary biology and cultural evolution. He is the author of *Warlike and Peaceful Societies*, *the Interaction of Genes and Culture*, and this is basically the book we are going to focus on today and the type of research that we will be talking about. So, Dr. Fog, thank you a lot for taking the time to come on the show. It is a pleasure to everyone.

Agner (00:00:52):

Thank you. This sounds exciting.

Ricardo (00:00:55):

I have already interviewed some people on our warlike behavior or war tendencies as a species. I have interviewed Dr. Azar Gat and others. Let me just start with this question. Do you think that war is part of our human nature? I remember that from my interview with Dr. Douglas Fry, that he and other anthropologists and archeologists say that there is not enough evidence to make the point that war is part of our genetic endowment. In our evolutionary past, when we were hunter-gatherers and traditional societies, sometimes there were raids and feuds, but not really war. And we have mechanisms for diffusing violent behavior. What is your take on that?

Agner (00:02:15):

There is a lot of disagreement among scientists about this, and this disagreement has lasted for many years. In traditional anthropology, we sometimes have the romantic image of the noble savage, where people live in peace and harmony, and in harmony with nature. And then there was Thomas Hobbes who had the opposite idea of everybody at war with everybody else. There has been a disagreement about this for many, many years. More and more evidence is coming up that people were actually violent, or at least in some situations, people were very violent in the past. But of course, everything was on a lower scale. We did not have wars with a million people because you could not gather a million people in the stone age, so everything was on a lower scale. But still we had all levels of conflict.

We had raids and feuds, and sometimes it escalated. Quite often, people would flee rather than fight. If one tribe realized that they were weaker than the attacker, they would flee into another territory which was less fertile. Maybe they would starve or die from malnutrition rather than actually dying from direct violence. But there were territorial conflicts all the time. And if you go further back to chimpanzees – I think that is as far back as you can go in the time of evolution – among chimpanzees there is certain evidence that they have territorial war. One troop of chimpanzees will be fighting against another troop, killing some of the males, and conquering territory so that the strongest group would expand their territory. And the weaker group will shrink. And when the territory becomes too big it will split into two, and then you have another conflict. So this can be traced all the way back in history and evolution.

Ricardo (00:04:42):

One of the things that we can do as a proxy to study warlike behavior in prehistoric times is to study current hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies. For example, in your book, you go through many examples of such traditional societies, and see if they are more warlike or more peaceful as the title of your book suggests. We are going shortly to talk about the specific terms that you use. Isn't it the case that it depends more on the ecological conditions? Probably I should ask you, what are some of the ecological conditions that predispose particular societies to be more prone to war or more peaceful?

Agner (00:05:42):

Yes. That is indeed my theory. We have the capacity to be warlike and we have the capacity to be peaceful. We have both things in our genetic makeup and in our heritage. And so, as you say, it depends on the conditions. The conditions for war are that you have tribes with the same kind of subsistence competing for the same kind of resources, and you have no fixed boundary. It is easy to attack a neighbor group if you are hungry and they seem to have more food. These kinds of conflicts can escalate and you can have more and more violence. But if you are more isolated, if you live on an Island or there are high mountains that separate you from everybody else, and also if you live in a specialized niche, the society will be more peaceful. You know what a niche is? You are living in a kind of environment and nobody else is adapted to the same environment.

Ricardo (00:07:05):

That niche that you are referring to, are you focusing mostly on the kinds of resources that people use in a particular niche? For example food resources, or are you also including other kinds of things?

Agner (00:07:24):

Yes, water of course, and territory. But especially food. The !Kung Bushmen living in the Kalahari Desert have adapted for centuries to living in the desert. And nobody else is able to live in the desert because they do not know how to survive. They do not know how to find water, and they do not know how to find food. And there is another tribe living in Venezuela in a delta where everybody is sailing in swamps and they have to navigate and find specific kinds of foods. The neighbor tribes simply cannot penetrate this niche and they do not know how to find food there. There is no competition. These tribes or these groups become peaceful because they have no reason to fight and nobody has reason to attack them. So they develop in a peaceful direction.

Ricardo (00:08:27):

When we have a warlike society living in the kinds of conditions that you have just described – high population density and tribes that are close to one another and fight over the same resources. For them to go to war, do they always need a social structure where there are strictly defined leaders? Do they have a leader class or something like that?

Agner (00:09:11):

If they were not well organized, they would not be able to win a war. So that is the point.

Ricardo (00:09:19):

And to be organized, they need leaders, they need an established hierarchy?

Agner (00:09:26):

Yes, exactly. And they need strict discipline.

Ricardo (00:09:31):

Why do they need to be organized in that particular way? Why do they need a hierarchy and leaders? Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to organize to go to war. Is that it?

Agner (00:09:54):

Yes. This is indeed the crucial point in my theory. Let's say you are in a stone age tribe and you are in conflict with a neighbor tribe. Everybody agrees that we have to defend our territory. But me personally, I wouldn't like to fight because it's dangerous. So I would rather somebody else fight. This is the well-known collective action problem. Everybody agrees that we should work together, but everybody is also egoistic and saying that this is dangerous. I am scared. I do not want to fight because I may die. I would rather somebody else fight. Biologists have discussed for many years, how come people actually do fight? From a Darwinian point of view, you get more biological fitness by not fighting and let the others fight. From a fitness point of view, nobody would fight.

There have been all kind of theories of why people fight. Like kin selection, i.e. you share the same genes as your brother and so you defend your brother. And group selection when you share the same genes as the whole group. But the theory of group selection collapses when somebody enters your group, which happens when you capture a wife from the neighbor tribe.

So I found the theory that if you have a strong leader, then the leader can punish you for not fighting. If you are a coward and you are afraid to fight, or you fake illness, the leader can punish you. And even more important, he can reward brave warriors. Those who are best at fighting can get a high reward, like an extra wife or something, that is a pay in terms of biological fitness. If you have a strong leader, the leader can make rewards and punishments and motivate everybody to fight. If there is a high reward for fighting, and the reward is higher than the costs in terms of Darwinian fitness, then you will be motivated to fight. Those who are motivated to fight will get more children and pass on their genes to the next generation.

Ricardo (00:12:59):

In that case, it is the strong leader who has the power to judge other people and to decide on how people should punish free riders, for example?

Agner (00:13:19):

Yes. And then comes the crucial point. The leader can be despotic and take advantage of everybody else. So if there is no war, a leader would just be a pain in the ass. If the leader has sufficient power, he might take all the wives to himself. In some animal species, the strongest male takes all the females, and everybody else gets nothing. So a strong leader is not only an advantage, it is also a disadvantage, depending on how much coordination you need. And that depends on the conflict level with other tribes.

Ricardo (00:14:11):

When we talk about hunter-gatherers and horticulturalist societies, we are mostly referring to societies that are for the most part polygynous? Particularly if they are highly hierarchical, then the strong leaders and the best warriors are the ones that get to mate with the most women. And then there are the other men that are left with nothing, right?

Agner (00:14:55):

Yes. Of course, that sounds horrible from today's prevailing ideology, but that is how biology is. And sometimes biology shows inconvenient truths, but this is what all the data show. The more conflict there is, the more hierarchy and the more people support a strong leader. It shows that people actually have a flexible psychology. When people sense that their group is in conflict or danger, that somebody is threatening the whole group, then they feel a need for a strong leader. And if you have democracy, they would elect a strong leader. Or if you do not have, they will still support whoever's they think is the strongest leader. And he will raise to more power. But if people live in peace and harmony, and nobody is threatening their people or their group, then they will have a more egalitarian point of view and they will not tolerate a strong and despotic leader. People have a flexible psychology, and this is what is driving this change, this difference between different kinds of societies. The culture and the whole psychology of the culture can move in one direction or another, depending on how people perceive the level of security for the whole group.

Ricardo (00:16:34):

In these kinds of highly hierarchical societies where the men at the top take most of the resources and particularly the sexual resources in the form of women, isn't it the case that if we have higher levels of intergroup conflict, then there would also be very high levels of competition to try to get at the top, because that top is what gets most rewards? Or is the punishment that the strong leaders and the brave warriors impose on other people enough to keep them in check?

Agner (00:17:43):

This kind of competition for leadership or competition for high positions is exactly what can make a system break down. Big empires grow and grow. And at some point, they stop growing because there is no more land they can take within reach. And then the authoritarian ideology starts to crumble because people see no need for a strong leader. At the same time, there is a strong competition for leadership. And this competition is weakening the top or the elite. The elite is busy fighting each other rather than keeping the empire together. This is the kind of things that can make an empire collapse.

Ricardo (00:18:45):

That can also happen with more traditional societies, like hunter-gatherers or horticulturalists, right? We are not only talking about situations where a society gets over a certain threshold in terms of its population size, and then it starts collapsing because there is too much competition to get to the top of hierarchy. Can it also happen in hunter-gatherer societies?

Agner (00:19:22):

Yes, but the bigger the society has become, the more historic evidence we have. The big empires in history leave a lot of archeological evidence. We know more about them than about some stone age hunter-gatherers that lived 200 years ago.

Ricardo (00:19:46):

By archeological evidence, you mean for example architecture and in literate societies even written records, right?

Agner (00:19:58):

Yes. And they also build big temples or big castles and big monuments. They leave a lot of archeological evidence. So there is a bias in the archeological record. The most peaceful societies make small artifacts out of wood or something. It is just rotting away and they leave nothing.

Ricardo (00:20:27):

Later on in the interview, we will answer the question as to why art develops in two different ways in peaceful and warlike societies. But let me ask you one question that we haven't addressed yet. Why are most warriors and chiefs men and not women?

Agner (00:20:55):

We have already touched the topic that men are competing for women, more than women are competing for men. If you return to Darwinism, those people who leave most genes to the next generation, their genes will be more prevalent in the next generation. So what strategy can a man use to get as many children as possible?

Ricardo (00:21:33):

During our evolutionary history, there was sexual selection for those kinds of traits in men. That is why we have sexual dimorphism that leads men to be more able to participate in things like war.

Agner (00:22:09):

Yes. Even if there is no war, the men that are the best hunters will have a higher reputation in society. And they have better access to the most attractive women. In principle, there is no limit to how many children a man can get. If he can seduce enough women, he can get an awful lot of children. I think the historical record is held by Genghis Khan, the big emperor who had more than a thousand children, and his genes are spread all over Asia. But there is no way a woman can get a thousand children because her body is only able to produce a limited number of children. Of course, it depends on how much food she gets, and if she has a careful man, who provides resources and protects her, but still there is a limit. There is no big advantage for a woman in having many men, but there is a big advantage for a man to have any women. So the reproductive strategies of men and women are different. And this is in our genes. Today, people do not like that there is this difference, but biology sometimes tells an inconvenient truth.

Ricardo (00:23:35):

Knowing how our true nature works, how our evolved psychology works, can also help us better deal with some of the more negative aspects of it. Or at least the ones that we do not like in our current modern societies, I guess?

Agner (00:24:03):

That is a different discussion, but you are right.

Ricardo (00:24:09):

We have already been mentioning some aspects of this theory, but in your book you describe regality theory. Could you give us a summary of it?

Agner (00:24:29):

Yes. That is what we have already talked about. A culture can develop in a warlike direction where there is a strict hierarchy. That kind of culture, I call regal. It comes from Latin, rex is a king. There is a king on top of the hierarchy, so I call it regal. The opposite cultural direction, I call kungic, after the !Kung Bushmen, which was the least regal culture I have come across in my studies. So we have a scale from regal to kungic. The more conflict there is, or the more danger, the more the society develops in the

regal direction. The more peace, the more it goes in the opposite direction. This is reflected in a lot of aspects of the society in the social structure and in the culture.

Ricardo (00:25:44):

Just going back to archeology. As you mentioned, it is easier for us to study societies that are based on agriculture, particularly the big empires, because we have much more archeological evidence from them, including written records, but in prehistoric times the archeology that we have and the evidence, does it tell us that war was common among prehistoric peoples?

Agner (00:26:25):

There were different levels of conflict, as I told you. My studies show that it depends on the environment. If they live on a plain or some big grassland or savannah, where there is a neighbor group that lives from the same resources, then there will be conflict. And also if they have easy contact and a higher population density, like along a river. Some of the big civilizations grew along rivers, because the river can sustain a higher population density. They can develop agriculture. These things make conflict more possible and more likely because there is this river and this territory, which is very attractive for everybody. Everybody else wants to conquer this territory. So there will be a high level of conflict. And the level of conflict means more hierarchy and a bigger political unit.

This process is self-amplifying. The more regal and the more hierarchical the society, the more organized it can become. Then you can organize a more efficient food production, like agriculture and irrigation, and you can develop more efficient weapon technology. Another important thing is transport. When wheels became possible or when horses became available, that allowed a troop to travel further or gather a bigger troop to attack the neighbor. All these kinds of technological developments go together with ever-growing territories and ever-growing empires. This is a self-amplifying process that starts with a small village and then a city state and a state, and grows into a big empire. The empire grows and grows. And at some point, they are unable to grow anymore because within the possible travel distance there is nothing more to conquer.

As long as there is war, the war is driving this regal process and this psychology where people support their leader and support their troops. All the soldiers have a high esteem so that this process keeps going. But it changes when the empire becomes too big. They had limited communication in those days, so what happened more than a week's travel away did not concern people. It was difficult to motivate warriors to travel so far. And all the logistics of transporting food and everything. There was a practical limit to how much an empire could grow. When it reaches this limit then the regal process falls apart because there are no more wars to be fought, or people do not care about a war that takes place very far away. So they lose support for it. The support for the big hierarchy and the elite is crumbling. At the same time, the elite is growing because they get children and their children also want a high position. There is competition for the attractive elite positions. So there is a big elite that actually is not working and just consuming a lot of money on luxury and is not very useful to society. Then the empire accumulates a lot of debt because somebody has to pay for all the luxury of all the people on top. They have no more money and the peasants become poorer and poorer and it all collapses. Sometimes it ends with a war or a famine or a disease epidemic, and the empire falls apart. Then maybe there is another empire or an ambitious wannabe king somewhere else who will start to conquer this territory. So it goes in cycles, and these cycles can take several hundred years or thousands of years for the growth and fall of empires.

Ricardo (00:31:47):

We are already getting into the second big topic of our interview. This is how civilization evolved through the rise and fall of empires. Let me ask you a question that might be a very controversial one. We have already mentioned the most important conditions that lead to the development of a warlike or a peaceful society, and in particular the ecological conditions. When we have war, and particularly when we have big societies based on agriculture, like chiefdoms and states, do you think that war can act as fuel for innovation and that it can accelerate cultural evolution and even bring about what we call civilization itself?

Agner (00:32:53):

In some respects, yes. Obviously, weapon technology is developed because empires or warlike nations invest more in developing weapon technology, and also transport technology to transport warriors to the frontier. And also a legal system because they have the need for a strong discipline. All the legal principles that we take for granted today have been developed through the growth of empires. So in some way you are right. Some aspects of our development have been fueled by war. But individual initiative is something else. If there is a one genius with a great idea, and he wants to start a new project, maybe a new kind of farming or inventing a new kind of boat or whatever, there is no room for individual initiative in a very regal society because everybody is disciplined and everybody is told what to do. People have no choice, no freedom to pursue their own ideas. So individual entrepreneurship does not work well in a regal society. They require a good legal system because they need protection of their invention so that nobody will steal whatever they can harvest from their good ideas. They need legal protection, so they need some kind of discipline, but too much discipline will prevent individual entrepreneurship. This dynamic up and down has actually led to different kinds of inventions.

Ricardo (00:35:00):

Throughout human history, there have been different kinds of war. Could you tell us basically how we categorize war? Are there different categories of war in human history, could you tell us about that?

Agner (00:35:24):

Yes. Obviously, the wars have grown in scale from small tribes that made raids against each other, and then city states and ever-bigger states being able to collect more troops on a bigger and bigger scale. It culminated with the two world wars where millions of people died. After the second world war, there have been very few territorial wars because the ideology is changing. The human rights ideology and democracy have gained almost universal ground. There is not much support for territorial war where one country simply conquers another country. The big territorial wars have almost disappeared. There have been very few after the second world war. But then there have been internal wars. This has developed into what I call proxy wars. There may be two different superpowers or wannabe superpowers or countries with imperial ambitions that want to make their influence in other countries, like in the Middle East where they have oil or other valuable resources. They are supporting one group or another. If there are two local groups in a country fighting against each other, or there is a more or less regal leader and rebels or insurgents wanting to overturn him, then maybe one superpower supports the leader and another superpower supports the insurgents and supply them with weapons so they grow much bigger than they would otherwise be. Then it becomes a proxy war. This is quite difficult to document because often the support is clandestine, but it happened in Afghanistan. It happened in Syria and all over the Middle East that USA and Russia are supporting each their side and supplying weapons and money and intelligence and everything. The insurgent groups grow bigger and become more violent than they would otherwise be. This is the kind of war that is dominating today.

Ricardo (00:38:13):

That kind of proxy war was dominating during the cold war, right? Particularly there was the United States and Russia in several different countries supporting two opposing forces.

Agner (00:38:36):

It is still happening today.

Ricardo (00:38:37):

In places like Syria, for example.

Agner (00:38:42):

And in Afghanistan where Russia gained more and more influence and USA did not want to look at that. So USA supported the rebels in Afghanistan that fought against the Russians. And then these rebels became Taliban and other groups that are now against the USA. The same happened in Syria where USA supported some small rebel groups in order to bring down president Assad. And these groups grew stronger and stronger, and they became Islamic State. Suddenly from nothing, they became a big power and were against the USA, but many of their weapons and resources are actually originating from USA and somehow have found their way. We do not know how, because it's all secret. But somehow, some resources from the USA have been allocated to rebel groups in Syria. And by some mysterious ways they ended up in the hands of Islamic State and allowed them to grow big and be against the USA. It is a bloody mess.

Ricardo (00:40:04):

We are as talking about proxy wars. Perhaps most of them are civil wars where each side is supplied or supported by a big power, for example the United States and Russia. But what are the main factors behind civil Wars? What needs to happen in a particular society or country for a civil war to take place?

Agner (00:40:46):

It is only possible if there is a weak government. Sometimes it ends up with a failed state where the government does not work at all, and all is chaos and violence. Of course, support from other countries will add fuel to the fire and make the conflict bigger than it would otherwise be.

Ricardo (00:41:15):

Can it also happen in situations where a particular society would need to have more regal characteristics? Perhaps a weak state has no strong leader and it is difficult for them to obtain internal stability.

Agner (00:41:48):

Yes. This is especially happening in countries that are rich in resources. In the Middle East, there is a lot of oil, and also in South America. In Africa, they have other resources. They produce a lot of food and minerals and everything. It is still a paradox that the countries that have most resources are the most unstable, because everybody wants to get access to these resources. Especially superpowers far away want to get access to these resources. Therefore, they often get involved in these conflicts. That contributes to making failed states. This is called the resource curse or the oil curse. The more resources a country has, the more likely it is to see conflicts, unless they have a very strong government that can keep it all together and suppress the conflicts.

Ricardo (00:42:59):

Another kind of violent manifestation that we as humans have resorted to throughout history – and nowadays it makes a lot of way into the news – has to do with terrorism. What is terrorism from your perspective, that you put forth in your book? Why is it that certain groups of people resort to terrorism in particular situations?

Agner (00:43:35):

Fundamentally, it is people who have a lot to fight for but have very few resources. They have no weapons. In Palestine, for example, they are very suppressed by Israel and they have very few resources to fight with. The only thing they can think of is to attack somebody. Maybe out of simple rage because they are desperate and they have no weapons. There is also another thing in it. Somebody else may support them, and not always from obvious motives. Terrorism will fuel the regal psychology, not only of the terrorist group, but more so of the group they attack. If rebels use terrorism tactics against some state, then that state becomes more regal, and that makes people support their leader more. So the leader or king or president of the attacked country will be able to use stronger means against the terrorists. This actually backfires and the terrorists become more suppressed rather than less. So the tactic rarely works. It can go on for decades. There was a lot of terrorism in Ireland. The Irish Republican Army did not know what else to do. It was a bad tactic, but it was all they could think of. The British media were actually censored. What we heard in the rest of the world, like me setting a Denmark, we got the news from the British media. I did not know the media were censored, but they were all on the British side. I just thought, oh those bloody terrorists, and then I didn't think twice. The Irish point of view never reached the external world. It was a very inefficient method. And this is why terrorism conflicts can last for very long. The conflict is never solved because the strategy is counterproductive.

Ricardo (00:46:31):

So terrorism is usually counterproductive, but are there instances where terrorists can reach their goals? At least provoking fear on their targets or cause political instability that they can profit from?

Agner (00:46:59):

They can profit economically, for example from the heroin in Afghanistan. They can exploit the chaos and make a lot of profit by producing drugs or looting oil or diamonds or other valuable resources. But in terms of reaching their political goal, no. It is very rare that they actually make any serious progress.

Ricardo (00:47:33):

You mentioned that a frequent response from states that are targeted by these groups is to become more regal through counterterrorist measures. And sometimes they even go to the point of removing civil rights. Do these counterterrorist measures work? Do they solve the problem? Or are they just something that politicians put into practice because people support more regal states when they are under fear from terrorist groups?

Agner (00:48:29):

Counterterrorist measures help big leaders stay in power and be reelected, but it does not help solve the problem because the grievances are still there, and they are just getting stronger and stronger the more you suppress the rebels. That is why terrorism problems never end, they can go on for decades.

Ricardo (00:48:57):

So the counterterrorist measures usually do not solve the issue, but they are still popular because people are fearful of terrorist groups?

Agner (00:49:11):

Yes, that is right.

Ricardo (00:49:14):

In terms of proxy wars and states providing resources to different factions in a particular country, I would like to ask you if external military interventions are a good strategy for big powers like Russia and the United States to get into a particular country and support a faction? Does that contribute to stabilizing those societies?

Agner (00:50:13):

In most cases, they *are* the problem because they are not there to spread democracy. They are there to get access to resources, even if they say something else. So that is not a way to solve the problem. The problem needs to be solved by international coordination with peacekeeping forces and securing the borders and actually exposing clandestine support for rebel groups, cutting off the supplies to both factions of the conflict.

Ricardo (00:50:52):

And those are basically the main ways to prevent civil wars from continuing or even from starting?

Agner (00:51:03):

Yes, I think so. It needs international political pressure on both parts. And it also needs to expose all the clandestine things that are going on. And that is very difficult.

Ricardo (00:51:18):

And talking about preventing war, in the long peace since roughly 1945, why have there been no direct wars between powerful countries. What has changed at the level of international politics for that to happen?

Agner (00:52:06):

I think it is a change in ideology. There is more support for democracy and human rights. There is more communication. People are aware of what is happening in other parts of the world. Any territorial aggression will be met with a lot of political resistance or condemnation from all over the world. And also from their own populations. Their own populations do not want to go to war because they see no point in it. It benefits only the leaders. It does not benefit the population of the countries. People do not want their sons to die in war, so the political support in the superpowers is smaller because there is more public resistance. People are more informed today and less easy to fool. People are still fooled today, but less so than before.

Ricardo (00:53:17):

That is a good thing to know. Does it have something to do with the political systems? I mean, because democracy has been spreading throughout the world. Is it the case that democratic countries are less prone to go to war with one another, or even to have a civil war and unrest?

Agner (00:53:41):

There is a question here. What is cause and what is effect? Because studies show that actually the peace comes before the democracy. Sometimes we are trying to spread democracy through war and that does not work, obviously. History shows that the peace comes first, and when the country is settled in peace,

then it develops to become more democratic. Of course, democratic ideals also prevent new wars from coming up, so the causality goes both ways, but basically, you need peace before you can build democracy. You cannot impose democracy on a troubled country. You have to get peace first.

Ricardo (00:54:33):

Let us talk a little bit about authoritarianism. What is authoritarianism, and does it occur on both the right and the left wing of politics? Because until recently, I guess, people associated authoritarianism mostly with the extreme right.

Agner (00:55:04):

The term authoritarianism was invented by a psychologist. In the beginning, they saw it as a kind of personality. They focused on individuals that were authoritarian. It took many years before they discovered that it is actually a group phenomenon. And this is almost the same as a regality in my theory. I just came from a different starting point. It is the same phenomenon looked at as an individual phenomenon and as a group phenomenon. The thing that psychologists described as authoritarian personality is actually the same as I am seeing in a regal society. I see it as a group phenomenon, and some psychologists are also now beginning to see it as a group phenomenon. It is two different sciences looking at the same phenomenon.

Ricardo (00:56:24):

As I mentioned, I would like to ask you specifically if you think that authoritarianism is associated with a particular political side, like the right or the left. Can it occur on both the right and the left side of the political aisle?

Agner (00:57:02):

Yes, you have a point. Some psychologists have invented something they call right-wing authoritarianism, and defined measurement scales for it. And then suddenly somebody started to study Russia and other communist states and found that there was a lot of "right-wing authoritarianism" in the socialist States. So it is really misnamed in my opinion. It is not tied to left or right. It is tied to hierarchy, and you can have hierarchy in socialist States as well, as we have seen.

Ricardo (00:57:51):

Like in the former Soviet states and former communist states?

Agner (00:57:58):

And China and other communist states, yes. They have also been very authoritarian. Maybe not in the beginning when the ideology was formed, but that is how they developed.

Ricardo (00:58:11):

Let me ask you one thing in terms of authoritarianism or regality. Since you say that it is more of a collective phenomenon and not an individual phenomenon, for example, an individual figure like Stalin or Hitler or Mao that are able to completely manipulate their societies to turning into authoritarian dictatorships. What do you think comes first? Do you think that it is the leader that induces fear about an outgroup in people and that is what leads them to support him, or that the leader notices that there is some sort of problem that already exists, and they might be able to focus society's attention on that particular problem, and then get a scapegoat that they blame for all the problems? Where does the causality arrow point? Does it start with a particular problem that already exists and then an individual tries to profit from it and rising in the hierarchy, or is it that people get manipulated by him?

Agner (01:00:03):

It is both. If there is no conflict then people will see no need to support an authoritarian leader. You are talking about Hitler. People actually voted for Hitler. That came after the big depression. There were big problems and people were very poor. The statistic shows that those areas where most people voted for Hitler were the areas where there was most unemployment. The more social problems there are, and the more threat there is against the society, the more people will be prone to support an authoritarian leader. But as you say, it is also possible to manipulate, and Hitler certainly did that. He put the blame on Jews and homosexuals and Gypsies, as you know. And he also staged false flag attacks and blamed the attacks on the on the Polish. He actually had people put in Polish uniforms and make an attack on a radio station, and stuff like that. These kinds of manipulations actually happen. They have happened before most big wars. There have been manipulations where you blame somebody else and you stage or fabricate some kind of threat, that is not real, or exaggerate some kind of threat. Today, it is mostly terrorism. The wannabe leaders or ambitious leaders are sometimes manipulating people with scare tactics and exaggerating the threats of terrorism, or whatever.

Ricardo (01:01:57):

When people like Hitler started imposing laws and rules that turned their societies into more and more dictatorial, did those laws, at least at the beginning, get support from people in general, because they thought they would solve the problems at hand, or did they simply reach the level where they were able to impose a dictatorship in their country?

Agner (01:02:41):

Hitler was a great manipulator. Radio was a new thing in the 1930s. Radio was a new invention. There was no television yet. The Nazi party promoted radios and encouraged everybody to buy a radio. And this radio was used for propaganda. People were not used to this kind of propaganda. The only voice they heard was the propaganda voice. There was no counter voice. They got a very one-sided propaganda, which of course helped Hitler come to power and dismantle democracy. So a lot of people supported him and voted for him. It is partly sophisticated manipulation, but it is not possible unless there is some kind of external threat, some kind of danger that can be used for scaring people.

Ricardo (01:03:49):

Before we talk about the role that social media or the mass media have, let me just ask you another question about authoritarianism. I have had on the show Dr. Michelle Gelfand, and she has developed her theory of tightness and looseness, where she classifies certain societies as more tight or more loose, that has to do with certain threats. Do you think that we can connect authoritarianism with tightness/looseness theory?

Agner (01:04:30):

Yes, indeed. Michelle Gelfand's theory is very similar to mine. It is a more narrow theory. She connects it with danger like I do, but she does not connect it with evolutionary mechanisms and with such a broad level of cultural effects that I do. But the theories are very similar indeed. That is right spotted of you.

Ricardo (01:05:03):

And in terms of mass media, what is the role that mass media might play in warlike situations? The role that media can play in the rise of a particular strong leader and the reasons why that leader wants to wage war on a particular country. For example, trying to show the positive aspects of the war and not the negative ones?

Agner (01:06:15):

You know, there is a saying that the first casualty of war is truth. In every war, there is manipulation of the mass media. There has been manipulation in a lot of cases in all parts of the world prior to war and during war. The leaders have used scare tactics and exaggerated the danger of the enemy, and quite often also fabricated dangers that were not there. There are a lot of cases documented in my book. There is a lot of media manipulation, because people do not want to die in war. War is a bloody hell. Nobody wants war except those who profit from it. It needs manipulation and there is big time manipulation.

Ricardo (01:07:08):

Let us go back to the distinctions between regal and kungic societies. We have already mentioned the differences in terms of political organization, for example egalitarianism, but there are also differences in terms of the preferred reproductive strategy. I mean, there are *r* and *K* reproductive strategies. What is the difference between the *r* and the *K* reproductive strategy? And what is the kind of reproductive strategy that regal and kungic societies adopt?

Agner (01:07:54):

The *r* and *K* strategies are something from evolutionary biology. Some animal species have many offspring and do not care for each offspring, while other animals have few offspring and care a lot for their few offspring. That is called *r* strategy versus *K* strategy. It is no coincidence that I have regal and kungic with an *R* and a *K*. But this is a cultural theory. It is different. It was a source of inspiration for me when I started, but do not take the analogy too far because the analogy does not fit all the way. But we have the regal societies where we have war and the war needs soldiers. It needs cannon fodder. The regal society wants people to have many children, while the peaceful society does not want overpopulation. They want people to have fewer children. So there is this coupling here.

Ricardo (01:09:09):

Since we are talking about children, there is also differences in how children are treated in regal and kungic societies, right? Could you tell us about that in terms of the discipline and treatment of children?

Agner (01:09:26):

Of course, children are taught discipline all through their childhood in a regal society, because they need to be brave and obedient soldiers. There are many kinds of ideology and social systems. It penetrates all kinds of society. The religion becomes more strict because religion is a perfect way of disciplining children in regal societies. And even art. You can use art for glorifying the king. You can build magnificent castles with a lot of decoration to glorify the king or god or war heroes, while in a more peaceful and kungic society, you have more imaginative and improvised art. Artists can be more innovative and pursue their own ideas. So there is a big difference in art. And even in music. The music is very perfectionist and embellished in regal cultures. In more kungic cultures, we have jazz and rock and all kinds of pop music. There are less rules. It is more imaginative. It is reflected in all kinds of cultural expressions. This is quite impressive to study.

Ricardo (01:11:14):

Even though we as modern people live in a WEIRD society – WEIRD is the acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies that came from the work of Joseph Henrich and others – perhaps for us this is something very controversial and brings some uneasiness, but some of

the best pieces of art that we have nowadays and that we as tourists visit and see come from societies that were more warlike.

Agner (01:11:54):

You are thinking about classical music?

Ricardo (01:11:59):

Classical music and the very beautiful architecture that we find, for example, in Rome.

Agner (01:12:08):

All of the magnificent churches and cathedrals and castles and statues, they are very embellished to put the emperor on top or to praise God. People have put an awful lot of resources into these magnificent buildings that we admire today. I do not think anybody would spend the same amount of money and resources on building something similar today. You have a point there.

Ricardo (01:12:52):

Let me ask you a question that is not directly related to war. Why are Scandinavian countries composed by the happiest people in the world, or at least when they are surveyed, they manifest that they are happy?

Agner (01:13:28):

Of course, it is controversial how you measure happiness, but quite often the Scandinavian countries top the list of happiness. I am sad to say that Denmark is now number two and not number one, but I feel proud of living in Scandinavia. It has to do with social security. We are more secure. And we are quite kungic countries. If you look at the graphs, we have the North European countries at the kungic end, and you have war-torn countries in Africa and the Middle East at the regal end of the graph. That is because we have security. We have a long tradition for social security. We have free health care and free education and a security net. If you lose your job or you become ill and unable to work, there is still a security net behind you. So that kind of things make people comfortable. We have very little to fear and that drives us in the kungic direction. All the freedom that comes through this makes people happy because we can do whatever we want. I can do this kind of research, and nobody is telling me what to do. I am telling myself to do this because I think it is interesting. We have more freedom, and happiness comes with that.

Ricardo (01:15:03):

Do you think that we can classify Scandinavian countries as kungic states?

Agner (01:15:10):

Yes, if you look at the graph, then all the North European welfare states go to the kungic end, and the most poor and war-torn countries go to the opposite end.

Ricardo (01:15:23):

Do you think that the regality theory that you have developed, and our propensity to be both warlike and peaceful depending on the circumstances, do you think that this knowledge can be applied in the political environment today for us to be able to prevent war? We have already been very successful in preventing war, at least between the big powers since the end of the Second World War. But do you think that the kinds of wars that are still going on, like asymmetric wars, proxy wars, and civil wars, that we can use your theory to end them and to prevent new ones from occurring?

Agner (01:16:25):

Yes, indeed. The first thing is to create security everywhere. Secure the borders of all countries. Do not allow any aggression across a border. Fix the borders wherever they are and create security for everybody. That is the most important thing. And the second thing is to expose manipulation when somebody is manipulating people through fear, like exaggerated terror warnings. And also the media. I do not know how to control the media, but at least expose the fear mongering in the media. Creating security for everybody. That is the most important thing.

Ricardo (01:17:34):

Do you think that it would ever be possible to change the media to be more balanced? Perhaps it is important for people to know that a particular terrorist attack occurred somewhere, but they could have specialists putting things into perspective and seeing that terrorism kills very few people in comparison with many other causes.

Agner (01:18:20):

There is a lot of bad news in the media. It is a paradox that fear sells. Most mass media are commercial. They need to attract the readers and viewers to stay at the TV station during the commercials. They are not selling news. They are selling viewers to the advertisers. As long as the media are completely controlled by economic competition, and this competition is extremely fierce in many places, the media that have less fear mongering may lose the economic competition to somebody else who is warning against some sex criminal at the other end of the world, or whatever. So this is a problem. We need a different kind of media that do not depend on advertising. In Northern Europe, we have a tradition for public service television and radio paid by the state. That has indeed contributed in my opinion to the development of the welfare state, because the media were supposed to be objective and neutral and informing people. But this has been undermined by competition and market philosophies. This idea of public service is not as strong as it used to be, unfortunately.

Ricardo (01:20:11):

Do you think that we can use your regality theory to change the political systems in particular countries? The reason why they are organized politically in the certain way and have the law systems that they have is, historically speaking, that they developed as regal societies, and now where they no longer wage war against other countries and they do not have to be fearful of being attacked by big powers like China and Russia that still have elements of dictatorship. Do you think that we could apply your theory to get their political systems and law systems to change and to become more modern and respectful of individual rights?

Agner (01:21:39):

Yes, but I do not want to preach ideology because I do not like the mixing of science and ideology that we are seeing in many places. I want to say that science is science, ideology is ideology. But of course, ideology can be inspired or based on science. But if we create security and make sure that everybody is safe and can survive whatever happens, and nobody is attacking a different country, then the culture will automatically develop in a more peaceful and democratic direction. That is my take on it.

Links:

[This interview on YouTube](#)

Second interview: Cultural Evolution, Memetics, Politics and the Media: [Watch on YouTube](#), or [read the transcript](#).

YouTube channel: [The Dissenter](#), by Ricardo Lopez

Book: [Warlike and Peaceful Societies](#), 2017, by Agner Fog

Book: [Cultural Selection](#), 1999, by Agner Fog

[Regality theory website](#) and [discussion forum](#), by Agner Fog

[Cultural Selection website](#), by Agner Fog