

# Humanity at the Crossroads

2019

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It seems that my entire career as a social scientist has been leading me to this conclusion: the long term viability of humanity in the condition of complex society – the state necessary for civilization – is dubious at best. Many astute observers of modern society – and especially of modern “developed” societies – have recognized this situation while coming at it from different directions. Unfortunately many of these assessments deal with it only partially. Penetrating to the underlying or basic cause eludes most. So, we end up with a great many valuable but incomplete “answers/solutions” being offered by various experts from the perspectives of their different disciplines. What follows is my take on this underlying cause and its source in human genetics, physiology and mentation.

The primary cause: Insufficient Cooperation at the Scales Required to Support Complex Society. Why? Because humans are by nature both competitive and cooperative, but the competitive – biological survival “instinct” – is the default mode. The instinct to fully cooperate is a genetic adaptation that comes later, it is limited, and it is more fully expressed in women than in men. Testosterone is the culprit and when it is active together with adrenaline it charges up men to be competitive and aggressive much more so than is the case for women who have much lower levels of this hormone. The overall result is that humans are only genetically/physiologically/mentally “programmed” to fully cooperate in small groups. In this regard it is worth noting the correlation between the proportional size and volume of the prefrontal and neocortexes among catarrhini primates and the numbers of fully cooperative members in their groups: monkeys 10-12; apes 20-30; humans 100-150. Interestingly, for 96% of human history, humans lived mostly in extended family bands that often coordinated as tribes, and these groupings correspond rather closely to the group size range between 20 and 150. Even in modern complex society most extended family and close friendship networks for individuals contain between 50 and 150 members.

In general, when human groups exceed the 100-150 member scale, the inclination to cooperate abates and the tendency to compete rises. Is it any wonder then that humans are more competitive and less cooperative in complex societies of thousands and millions, and now billions of members! Culture struggles mightily to overcome this limitation but with only limited success. It follows that the default mode for how humans in complex society regard the vast majority of their “fellow” members is much more competitive than it is cooperative. Just consider our standard behavior as we move about in the

typical urban context: we execute a quick glance at that “other” as we approach on a city sidewalk, and if we do not instantly recognize the face, we look aside and “tolerate” the “stranger.” Caution prevails, and caution is the first leg in adopting a fully competitive/defensive stance.

Lets see how this plays out when we look at the challenges that modern complex society faces – all of which require global level cooperation and social integration if they are to be sufficiently resolved in a timely manner. The list of these challenges is lengthy: nuclear war; pandemics, cyber attacks and lack of cyber security; uncontrolled information on the Internet [subject to gross manipulation and misuse]; unsatisfactorily addressed climate change; unequal access to limited natural resources; worldwide air, fresh water, soil, and ocean pollution; unregulated use of robotics, artificial intelligence, and big data; insufficiently regulated genetic engineering; inequality within and among nations – economic, educational, racial, gender, ethnicity, etc.; social isolation, polarization, interactive dysfunction due to excessive and selective media exposure; inadequately integrated and regulated world banking and financial system [eg. exploitation, “renting” and excessive fees]; kleptocracy – tax evasion and money laundering by the wealthy, the politically and economically powerful, and organized crime through shell corporations; ideological extremism and populism; species extinction; negative impact of moneyed interests in politics; voting and voter suppression; trend toward authoritarian rule; deforestation; lack of critical thinking ability and use by the public; anti-science and alternative facts agendas; militarization of police and citizens; terrorism; mass shootings and hate crimes; attacks on freedom of the media/press; media compartmentalization and lack of journalistic integrity; political paralysis and failure of parties to communicate and compromise; lack of respect for the rule of law and the institutions of government; etc.

For the most part, these challenging matters are both national and global in scale. But there is no global level integrated society to deal with these issues. There are various economic and defense treaties among nations, a few federations of nations defined along limited lines [eg. EU], and internationally oriented foundations and NGOs. And of course there is the superbly weak, veto entangled United Nations. But there is no global society with a fully integrated and empowered global government to deal with these interrelated and collective challenges. Instead, for the most part individual nations have to try to address these issues, but they balk at the task citing the fact that these are not their responsibility alone. Unfortunately, given this situation, there is only so much individual nations can do at the same time the needs at the global scale escalate. So, at the global level, other than treaties on economic trade, we are

left mostly with lip service and weak commitments to “voluntary” agreements – where we get any coordination at all.

Why is humanity having such a great deal of trouble just keeping nations stable and functional? Because the internal competitive, self-interested forces – led at the core by capitalist enterprises and the associated financial industry – are controlling/suppressing/campaigning against the forces for cooperation. And they do this because the changes that the cooperative forces want to see implemented threaten the benefits of the self-interested forces which in turn mostly come from sustaining the status quo. Why do they get away with this? Because the competitive forces appeal to a set of values in the nation’s citizenry that support a comprehensive competitive perspective, which remains the human default mode for individuals as they relate to their fellow national citizens mostly as strangers. These appeals can be successful – especially if they stress divisions among these “other citizens” along lines of race, ethnicity, or religion. And of course, while evoking the competitive orientation, these conservative appeals demean the importance of the social values that support cooperation – cry of “socialism.” What results is the classic confrontation between the advocates of individualism and the supporters of common good/communalism/public benefit, which promotes cooperation!

Politically, this opposition in values and perspectives is reflected in the politico-economic extremes of libertarianism and communism with general conservatism and liberalism/progressivism/socialism resting on the continuum in between. At the libertarian extreme, government itself is regarded as the problem since pursuit of the public good through the collective actions of the government can limit the competitive self interests of the individual. And at the communist extreme, the individual is the problem and the only things that matter are the communal interests of the group and the decisions made by its government [which is supposed to be democratic].

Individual rights vs. social benefit is just another way the genetically built-in, fundamental human dynamic of competition vs. cooperation gets expressed. And, all of this reverts back to the fact that when the number of members in the social group exceeds about 150, the basic biological inclination of humans to cooperate wanes. So, it should come as no surprise: given the huge numbers of “strangers” among citizens in the populations of complex societies, it is relatively easy for conservative forces to elicit the competitive perspective in the population and thereby oppose the efforts to elicit increased levels of cooperation. In complex society, culture always struggles to support the level of cooperation/government that is needed just to assure the continuation of our large nations, much less to address humanity’s global scale challenges.

Humans just seem unable to properly balance their competitive and cooperative “instincts” outside of relatively small groups where intimate personal relations are the norm and where these relations support both respect for individual skills/ talents and full social cooperation. For all of the incredible potential we can see for humans in much larger numbers in complex societies, it seems that humanity is just way ahead of its evolutionary “self” in being able to sustain this complex societal state by cooperating sufficiently at a global scale – so as to address its many global scale challenges and thereby avoid causing its own demise!

For other essays on the issue of competition versus cooperation that consider additional significant variables, see the Cooperation section under Topics on my website: [www.dynamic-humanism.com](http://www.dynamic-humanism.com) .