

Keys To Building Human Bridges To The Past



Deborah Barsky

09-7-2024 ~ Human technologies have continued to evolve exponentially since the end of the Paleolithic: today we are using them to learn more about the past.

Scientific breakthroughs about human origins have captured the curiosity of audiences eager to learn more about the past. We are entering a new phase, thanks to the accumulation of evidence and new research technologies, in which experts and audiences are increasingly asking bigger questions about who we are and where we came from—and are teasing out some valuable answers.

This development has come at a time when there is a growing sense that [linking the past with the present can support the attempt to build a more sustainable future.](#)

Groundbreaking technologies are being applied to archeology. Modern archeologists are taking advantage of digital tools to share knowledge about human origins on a widening spectrum of platforms, including [museum exhibits](#), [virtual settings](#), and [on-site experiences](#).

There is, however, a choke point in this process. The academic findings are described in a highly technical language that requires familiarity with the jargon of many research disciplines and testing methods, making the wider public adoption of research from human evolutionary science and archeology difficult. And most experts from these fields are not sufficiently trained to translate their

findings to the array of audiences that can use them. But a growing number of initiatives are providing new ways to bridge the gap separating academia from global public awareness, emerging often from leading research institutions in [Australia](#), [East Africa](#), [Western Europe](#), and the [U.S.](#) These centers and the educational efforts emerging from them nurture the evolutionary consciousness people need to appreciate *what it means to be human*.

Fostering knowledge about chains of events that affected the human evolutionary pathway thousands and even millions of years ago allows us to fit them into a coherent, multilevel chronological, and cultural framework. We can train our minds to reflect over long periods and find useful ways to compare chapters of human history. This fundamental viewpoint will permit the kind of planning necessary for solving long-term human challenges, from social to environmental.

A fuller spatial and temporal sense of human history produces logic that chimes with the best of our humanitarian impulses—by applying what we have learned, human history can be understood as a single global dataset—providing an authentic framework of connection to a universal evolutionary lineage.

We know that territorialism in other mammals and primates is a standard behavior, but there is a unique human overlay underwriting the inequalities of today.

[I have pointed out that inventing and nurturing symbolic differences is an adaptive strategy that emerged hundreds of thousands of years ago, during the Acheulian cultural period](#), and that evolved into as a cultural mechanism to create and maintain unequal access to rights and resources.

Conventional descriptions associated with archeology often evoke portrayals of adventurous treasure hunters seeking fame and fortune in faraway countries. In the collective mindset, “archeology” conjures idealized visions of the great civilizations of classical antiquity and the first urbanized societies that flourished only a few thousand years ago. However great they were, [the rise and fall of these cultural entities marks the commencement of a perpetual war-faring sequence that continues to be the hallmark of modern civilization](#).

But the human story extends much further back in time and no matter how prodigious they were, these societies were consolidated by modern humans who had already fully integrated the keystones of contemporary civilization.

Thanks to a new impulse launched by the digital revolution that our civilization is undergoing, prehistory invites us to gaze further back in time: deep into the Paleolithic—to discover and understand the foundations upon which organized urban societies were constructed. Compared with classical archeology, ancient Paleolithic records rely on a relatively sparse repertory, consisting mainly of fossilized bones and stone tools shaped by humans who were physically and cognitively very different from us.

While at first glance such objects may appear unremarkable, understanding their significance is essential to complete the picture of the human evolutionary trajectory. In fact, by limiting our inquiry to the sub-modern civilizations that emerged only over the last 5,000 years or so, we are ignoring 98 percent of human evolution that began in Africa at least 2.8 million years ago, when [our genus joined other hominins already thriving in Africa to systematically create the first complex technologies made from stone](#).

The emergence and evolution of these early techno-systems would alter the course of human evolution so significantly that we are still speculating where they will lead us in the future.

In that sense, these early stages of [the hominization process](#) that led our genus to adapt *culturally, rather than biologically*, by creating extrasomatic solutions to evolutionary challenges, are arguably the most important influences that shaped human origins. These solutions were initially made by transforming available materials into tools using specific sets of acquired skills that were systematized into [culture](#).

Through this cumulative process, our ancestors increased the assortment of objects that were to become essential to their survival. OverTime, the know-how required to obtain the skills to manufacture these tools also increased exponentially, eventually requiring composite modes of communication to transmit the knowledge from generation to generation.

By incorporating an ever-increasing array of disciplines, both classical and new, archeologists continue to learn more about the different phases of the fascinating journey that led our species to unprecedented techno-dependence. The unfolding of humanity can only be ascertained by unearthing and interpreting the fragmentary remnants left behind in the archeological record by the [thousands of](#)

[generations preceding the 8 billion souls presently living on Earth.](#)

Today, the keys to understanding human origins are becoming more accessible thanks to technologies used to share the exciting discoveries that form the totality of human prehistory and offer scientifically viable reconstructions to inspire even the most reticent of audiences.

Applying advanced scientific methodologies enables specialists to progressively build theories and attitudes that develop into sensibilities *based on current states of knowledge*. As a first step, it is important to understand that science is in a constant state of flux and premises must be constantly adjusted to keep pace with the latest discoveries. Meanwhile, the development of modern technologies continues to open doors to new ways to source information.

Modern technologies are not only creating new strategies to study the past but they are also transforming the methodologies traditionally used in prehistoric archeology. Some of the techniques are co-opted from other fields of science, like medicine, chemistry, ecology, and biotechnology, thus building up a mesh of collaboration among researchers working in vastly different fields of knowledge. This strategy further contributes to the exponential intellectual revolution underway in research on human origins.

Traditional disciplines, like paleontology and paleoanthropology, for example, are being reshaped by advances in genetic research that are filling in the gaps in the archeological record by shedding new light on [interrelationships between different species through time](#) at a lightning pace. Digital 3D reproductions of all kinds of archeological finds and even of the sites themselves provide astoundingly accurate imagery that can be analyzed and shared instantaneously. [Non-invasive geoarchaeological methods](#) are being used to locate and study all kinds of settings and the artifacts they yield, and [drones equipped with digital cameras allow surveys of hard-to-access areas to locate new archeological sites](#). High-powered microscopes linked to image processing software serve to determine how stone tools were used for archeobotany, sedimentary analysis, and more. Meanwhile, radiometric and other dating methods are improving our capacity to obtain increasingly precise age evaluations for the archeological sites under study.

Progress is being achieved in sharing data from prehistory at a quickening pace in many high-income countries in Eurasia and North America, where broad-

minded insights and international collaborations are stimulating public interest to take advantage of communication technologies to discover and explore universal patrimony relating to all periods of the Paleolithic.

In academia, scientific journals now often require scientists to share their data in online repositories with access to digital platforms that can be built upon by contemporaries and new generations who are encouraged to apply alternative technologies to glean new kinds of information from the same datasets. [Online platforms sharing archeological information](#) are easily available to those who wish to consult them. However, much remains to be done for many lower-income countries that still do not have access to the same technologies for exploiting their Paleolithic records on an equal footing, because they lack basic infrastructure and educational facilities, or they are struggling due to poverty, political turmoil, or even lengthy periods of warfare.

Today, the digital revolution has transformed how archeological data from all stages of human evolution can be transmitted to the public. Prehistorians have entered the arena of public awareness on all levels of social interplay, demonstrating the importance of applying long-term insights to tackle such pressing issues as [ecological collapse](#), [human migration](#), [war](#), and [gender inequality](#). By creating evolutionary awareness, Paleolithic archeology is helping society recognize the value of studying the distant past to overcome the myopia of our own historical moment.

By Deborah Barsky

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Robert Sapolsky: Are We Better Off Accepting That There's No Free Will?

09-06-2024 ~ *Interviewing the neuroscientist and primate behavior expert on a question that could radically change our understanding of reality.*



The release of *Determined*, a new book by renowned Stanford professor of primate behavior and neuroscience Robert M. Sapolsky, has catapulted him into the middle of an ancient debate: whether humans have free will and agency over their actions. [Determined](#) isn't just a bio-philosophical treatise: It covers the potential benefits that a society that accepts Sapolsky's thesis of there being zero free will and agency over our actions will likely become more humane and will be better at understanding and addressing humanity's challenges.

Sapolsky found fame while teaching the science of stress and anxiety from a neurological perspective and its presence in the wider primate world. His [popular teachings](#) have enlightened millions and opened new pathways to help people consider the biological causes of their behavior.

Over this year, Sapolsky has rolled a publicity tour in defense of *Determined's* thesis, including speaking on dozens of nationally known podcasts, and more recently, he has co-launched an informative and witty [YouTube Q&A show](#) with his talented daughter Rachel Share-Sapolsky.

We reached out to Sapolsky for an interview about his thinking on how public adoption of science can change perspectives, and his experience as an activist to try and get the world to think differently about the causes of human behavior.

Jan Ritch-Frel and Marjorie Hecht: You point to the early 1800s in France as a turning point in how society perceived epilepsy, from culpability for behavior during seizures to understanding it as a medical condition. Where are you seeing similar green shoots today?

Robert Sapolsky: A great example is the recognition that obesity is a biological disorder, rather than some sort of failure of Calvinist self-discipline. It is a biological disorder that is profoundly sensitive to psychological state and social context, but it is nonetheless biological.

To give the most dramatic example, if someone has a mutation in the leptin receptor gene, their brain will simply not process food satiation signals, regardless of how much willpower they have. Currently, stigma about weight is one of the most persistent prejudices in society, and findings like this are just beginning to change attitudes toward obesity.

Q: What in your research led you to volunteer as a witness for capital trials, and what did your experiences lead you to conclude about making a social impact through your research?

Sapolsky: If you conclude that we have no free will, that we are simply the outcome of the interaction of the biological luck over which we had no control with the environmental luck over which we had no control, the entire premise of criminal “justice” makes no sense intellectually or ethically. However, I’m not of much use if I show up in a courtroom to say to the jury that “hey, we’re all just biological machines.”

So my goals are much narrower with the public defenders I work with. You consider a defendant who has done something horribly damaging, and there’s the option to think of their behavior as an index of their questionable moral worth, or as a measure of the damage that their own nervous system sustained over their lives. So my job is to try to get juries to think the latter rather than the former, to teach them the science that leads one to that conclusion.

In terms of what impact I’ve had—it’s been almost entirely futile; we “lost” 11 of the 13 cases I’ve worked on. The jury sits there and nods their heads in the affirmative when you’re telling them how the frontal cortex works... and then when they go into the jury room and look at the pictures of the corpse, they come back with the maximal sentence.

Q: What human tendencies and capacities are you counting on for people to make positive use of your conclusion that there is no free will?

Sapolsky: Mostly I would be hoping for ways in which humans can counter their tendencies. By this, I mean to try to resist the lure of exceptionalism, which makes us decide that our needs are special and atypically worthy of consideration.

Q: Can you discuss how an individual can differentiate right from wrong but be “organically incapable” of appropriately regulating his or her behavior? What happens in the prefrontal cortex to cause this?

Sapolsky: The prefrontal cortex (PFC) can inhibit and restrain emotional impulses: If you are in a situation where you are tempted to do something unethical yet manage to resist, it is because of the PFC. Thus, any circumstance that damages, weakens the PFC makes that sort of self-regulation more difficult.

Thus, you can wind up with someone who knows right from wrong, can write erudite philosophical essays about the difference... yet in a moment of emotional arousal, may not be able to prevent themselves from doing something wrong.

Q: How do you think therapy helps an individual with depression or other problems? What changes in the brain are possible? How does free will enter into the therapy process?

Sapolsky: Just focusing on depression, its cognitive core is a tendency to distort reality in a negative direction. On an emotional level, it's perceiving yourself to be helpless in circumstances that are not really the case; on a neurochemical level, it's probably a shortage of serotonin and a number of other neurotransmitters that produces an inability to anticipate pleasure and to block negative rumination.

These are all different levels of explaining the same thing. On the psychotherapy route, the most effective approach is typically cognitive behavioral therapy, which basically consists of recognizing the reality of some trauma, failure, or rejection in the past, but also recognizing that it is a distortion to assume that you are fated for the same in the future, that you are helpless and hopeless in trying to prevent some manner of reoccurrence.

Where the meds fit in are to facilitate that process. Drugs that boost serotonin,

for example, lessen the stickiness, the unstoppable qualities of negative rumination ...which allows you the affective breathing space to begin to disassemble the distortions that give rise to the incessant negative affect.

Free will plays no role in any of this. Did you turn out to be the sort of person who makes X amount of serotonin instead of Z, whose pathways of negative rumination in the brain are tightly or loosely connected, whose learning makeup is one that is good or not at building upon efficacy? Did you turn out to be the sort of person who respects introspection, is capable of doing it insightfully, is capable of drawing on those insights as a buffer against negative emotion? Did you turn out to be the sort of person who, in the first place, could accept that they are struggling with depression? And we had no control over any of those.

Q: Why isn't what's called "early readiness potential," as detected in the brain, as much a form of free will as any subsequent action that carries out the potential?

Sapolsky: Because focusing on the early readiness potential, ERP, is missing the point. When exactly it has occurred with respect to when you form an intention to do something is not ultimately relevant to the issue of free will. Instead the absence of free will is shown looking at the more global question of, "How did you become the sort of person who would form that intent at that moment?"

Q: In your book Determined, you present an example of identical twins, only one of whom is schizophrenic with a very different brain imaging scan. Is schizophrenia then not inherited? Could it be the result of an infection?

Sapolsky: Genes are about inheriting tendencies, proclivities, and vulnerabilities in behavior, not about inheriting inevitabilities. Consider someone with schizophrenia and pick another person at random, and there is about a 2 percent chance that they will also suffer from the disease. If instead you pick the person's identical twin, there is roughly a 50 percent chance that they will share the trait. This is powerful demonstration of a genetic influence.

But the fact that the identical twin will have a 50 percent chance of *no* having schizophrenia is a demonstration that genes are just part of the mix of causes, not anything deterministic.

What are some of the non-genetic factors that contribute to schizophrenia risk? Yes, certain types of infections; perinatal birth complications; prenatal

malnutrition; chronic stress; and heavy cannabis abuse as an adolescent.

Q: In your lecture on religiosity, you rely on twin/adoption studies from the late 1960s and 1970s, which looked at schizophrenia and found that some other family members were what they termed schizotypicals. These individuals were not full-blown schizophrenics but they exhibited “off” behavior characteristic of schizophrenics. How do you respond to the criticisms of the twin/adoption studies, including criticism of the idea of a spectrum of schizophrenia conditions? (such as the work of [Jay Joseph](#))

Sapolsky: Twin studies, along with adoption studies, are the backbones of classic behavior genetics approaches, and are subject to some withering criticism that is completely valid.

If twin researchers tell you that genes explain X percent of the variability in some trait, applying the criticisms typically shows that the percentage is actually *lower* than X—not that genes have *nothing* to do with the trait. That has no effect though on the main observation, which is that close relatives of people with schizophrenia are very significantly more likely to display schizotypal traits than the general population.

That shows that there is a shared genetics to schizophrenia and schizotypalism—and implicit in that is precisely Joseph’s point, which is that disorders with schizophrenic elements form a continuum, a spectrum (while not at all supporting his broadest conclusions).

Q: You’ve mentioned that you came from an Orthodox Jewish family. Did you have any reaction from the Orthodox community to your analysis of the roots of religiosity? Or from any other religious thinkers?

Sapolsky: I have had some very negative reactions from folks in both domains. However, those reactions are entirely based on completely missing what I am saying about the subject. I am not remotely saying anything as absurd as, “Ooh, you have to be psychiatrically suspect to be religious,” or even “Most/many/some people who are religious are psychiatrically suspect.”

I am saying that it is fascinating that traits that can be incapacitating psychiatric maladies in secular settings can be accepted, given sanctuary, and even be viewed as positives in the context of religiosity.

By Jan Ritch-Frel and Marjorie Hecht

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Political Collapse: Lessons From Fallen Empires



09-04-2024 ~ Our investigation of the disastrous society-wide collapses of four premodern polities, China's Ming Dynasty, the South Asian Mughal Empire, the High Roman Empire, and Renaissance Venice led to the discovery of an unexpected historical pattern. This revelation was not evident before these sudden collapses as all four polities had demonstrated forms of governance that persisted for centuries, had been among the wealthiest and best-governed polities of their eras, and had embraced policies fostering inclusiveness and egalitarianism that engendered strong support from the majority of their citizens.

We could not identify any exogenous causal factors for the collapses—such as drought, epidemic, or conquest by a more powerful foe (three of the four eventually were conquered, but only after their governments were considerably weakened)—adding to our confusion about what led to these major political transformations.

To understand the reasons for the political breakdowns, we decided to revisit an [earlier article](#) in which we had posited an answer to this question when it became increasingly clear to us that the conflictive political culture of the contemporary U.S. presents striking parallels with what we had discovered. We aim to reexamine our article to bring a comparative perspective on historically well-known episodes of collapse, their causes, and negative outcomes, and to alert U.S. citizens of the potential dangers we face, so we can highlight the need to take urgent corrective actions. We begin by referring to recent works by political scientists and anthropologists that provided theoretical context for our arguments.

Collective Action Theory Expands Our Understanding of Governance

In all four instances, collapse followed quickly after the leaders of these polities inexplicably and suddenly abandoned principles and practices that had successfully underpinned state-building and social stability. Their actions initiated a cascading series of events that brought a rapid decline in many aspects of society, which extended beyond the government. But why would the actions of just a few people have such severe consequences for otherwise enduring and well-organized polities?

We identified a plausible answer to this question when we considered collapse from the vantage of recently developed theories of human cooperation developed by political economists [Margaret Levi](#) and [Elinor Ostrom](#), along with several others. The cooperation ideas intrigued us because they potentially laid down a pathway to evaluate traditional claims that state-building did not result from cooperation in premodern times, but from the actions of the autocratic elite who coercively gained dominion over subservient and easily mystified subaltern subjects. A reliance on coercion was foundational for the traditional Western understanding that the rise of democracy in Classical Athens 2,600 years ago was an exceptional event that set Western (“Occidental”) political history on a separate and democratic track, sharply different from the “Oriental” autocracies. But is this entrenched presumption correct?

Humans as ‘Contingent Cooperators’

The most salient feature of collective action theory separating it from the Orientalist tradition is that it does not presume mystified subaltern subjects nor coercive leadership. The theory hypothesizes that both ruling authorities and subjects are thoughtful social actors (“contingent cooperators”) who will agree to

limit their selfish actions when they perceive that the actions of others are consistent with mutual benefit (“contingent mutuality”).

Our recent work in this [regard](#) has supported the hypothesis as applied to state formation. What we have found is that subjects are more likely to gain confidence in governing authorities and the policies and practices of a government based on the degree to which the leadership willingly provides elements of what is called “good government” (or “[good governance](#)”).

Good governance includes the degree to which leadership will accept limits on its power, is willing to develop the governing capacity to identify and punish official corruption, is willing to provide citizens access to an impartial judiciary, and is prepared to implement equitable taxation, to open up access to positions of governing authority without favoritism, and to provide public goods beneficial to all households.

A key aspect of good governance is that if its benefits foster citizen confidence and compliance with obligations, its practices and principles must be judiciously adhered to, and good governance benefits must be made available across the realm without favoritism. We discovered that in instances where mutual benefit and good governance are key, state-builders and citizens recognized that impartiality was threatened when a leader’s power, or the state itself, was religiously sacralized. The same threat was felt when the state gained legitimacy and fiscal benefit by associating or controlling a particular religious institution (analogous to the contemporary concept of separation of church and state).

The population of Renaissance Venice, for example, was largely Catholic, yet featured considerable cultural diversity while also depending on trade relations with merchants who belonged to diverse cultures and religions. Correspondingly, strict rules prohibited affiliations of the leadership and their immediate family members with any religious institution. In South Asia, the Mughal Emperor Akbar instituted a strong program for governing in a diverse region that mandated religious neutrality of the state and encouraged reasoned dialogues between religious and political leaders. The Roman and Ming leaderships certified their legitimacy to govern, not as religiously sanctified beings, but as leaders whose actions were expected to benefit society. The policy of the Ming Dynasty also emphasized the need for neutrality in its dealings with the three main religions of its time.

A Cross-Cultural Study of Premodern States

We coded the good governance attributes across a worldwide sample of 30 premodern polities, and subsequent [archaeological](#) work by us and others has provided additional pertinent data. We also considered other variables that we hypothesized might enrich our understanding of the causes and consequences of mutual benefit and good governance; for example, we coded for demographic trends, which are population growth/loss, material standard of living of households, and the frequency of political struggles and organized opposition to state policies and practices. We also coded the relative severity of social, demographic, and agricultural changes after the collapse of the four polities.

Was Western Political History Really Unique?

Armed with a new theory, good governance measures to evaluate it, and a vast array of descriptive studies available from ethnographic, historical, and archaeological sources, we dwelled on the question: Was Western political history really unique? We know that coercive and autocratic states did exist in the past, as they still do today, but were there also experiments in state-building, outside of Western history, which were based on contingent mutual benefit and good governance, and were they similar to democracy? The coding of good governance variables yielded a surprising answer to this question as we were able to identify such experiments.

Although there is considerable variation in the details of governance across these cases, we identified forms of governing outside of Western history in which the central force guiding political change was contingent on the bond of obligation between governing authorities and subjects rather than on coercion. Further, in such cases, we also found that mutual benefit and good governance brought numerous advantageous downstream consequences for their respective populations.

For example, compared with the more autocratic and coercive states, the collectively organized polities were more politically stable, in part because public safety was greatly enhanced, there were far fewer episodes of anti-state movements (although disgruntled elites often would militate against the more egalitarian and inclusive policies), and there was a reduction in the frequency of internal conflicts between ethnic groups or religious groups.

As a result of these outcomes, resulting in part from the fact that states organized

based on mutual benefit and good governance, citizens were provided with opportunities to engage in cooperative social interactions and alignments that could bridge social, cultural, and economic cleavages. Good governance, for one, was a fertile ground for commercial growth in the form of marketplace economies that provided new opportunities and increased living standards for buyers and sellers irrespective of wealth, patrimony, or rural-urban setting. Marketplace economies grew alongside other institutional outcomes, including open recruitment to positions of governing authority, which provided entirely new pathways to social mobility for the public. Well-organized and more livable cities, which were easy to navigate, also enhanced possibilities for commingling, cooperative interactions, and bridged social alignments weakening the likelihood of antagonism between different groups.

The collective action theory is an action-oriented framework that focuses on the idea that diverse webs of cooperative action in society are engendered by the palpable social actions of persons who want to realize collective benefits. In relation to leadership, this requires a display of commitment to carrying out the necessary and often challenging work of good governance.

Patterns of Stability and Collapse: Three Counterintuitive Discoveries

To confirm that premodern governments could, in some respects, display features that we associate with contemporary democracy was itself a surprise, but we discovered other unanticipated aspects of premodern governance:

Endurability: Despite the obvious advantages in cases where we see a focus on mutual benefit and good governance, their focal periods (the period when a particular set of policies and principles remained stable) were only slightly longer, at 166 years on average, compared to the more autocratic polities with focal periods of 152 years, a difference that is not statistically significant. In addition, polities built more strongly around mutual benefit occurred relatively infrequently (only 27 percent of our sample had consistently high scores for good governance). This shows that despite the advantages of mutual benefit and good governance, they have been difficult to build and sustain in the long run.

Collapse Patterns: Further, while providing many more benefits to their citizens compared to autocratic polities, states that organized to achieve good governance also had more of a collapse pattern than polities that scored lower on good governance. That pattern includes the emergence of damaging factional struggles

for power, the loss of fiscal viability of the state, and even food shortages and demographic decline.

Collapse in the case of autocracies brought less serious consequences because, lacking much in the way of governance, groups such as neighborhoods, ethnic groups, and rural communities were already organized at the local level to respond to hazards. Yet, this fragmented form of adaptation was itself problematic, precluding coordinated responses to, for example, urban fires, lawlessness, or the actions of wealthy entrepreneurs who, lacking any opposition from a well-organized authority, were in a position to [distort](#) fair marketplace pricing.

Initiating Collapse: Earlier we mentioned the separation of religion and state because, although violating its premise was not the only misstep exhibited by the respective leaderships, it was among the most damaging. In Ming China, collapse followed the actions of leaders of the mid-16th century, including the Chia-ching Emperor, who became so obsessed with Daoist ceremonies and alchemy that he neglected his duties; his successor, the Wanli Emperor, turned his attention to gaining personal wealth, a violation of long-standing prohibitions. In the case of the Mughals, the fourth emperor, convinced by Muslim leaders, abandoned religious neutrality, even taxing Hindus more than Muslims and permitting the destruction of new temples. The Roman Emperor Commodus lacked interest in governing and became an avid performer as a gladiator. He identified himself with the god Hercules. Following his failed reign, the empire devolved into a chaotic and corrupt system in which, as the historian Ramsay MacMullen [concluded](#), “relationships involving anything other than the wish for material possession had no chance to develop.”

The case of Venice is particularly troubling in light of what has transpired in recent years in the U.S. Although the Venetian government possessed the institutional capacity to impeach leaders, when Doge Giovanni Cornaro and his family broke the religious neutrality and other rules, for example, as a result of his son accepting the position of Bishop of Bergamo, the governing council refused to impeach him. This action, regarded by many inside and outside of the government as a violation of long-standing rules, was not corrected, and the governing council's response to criticism was to double down on its authority. These moves, [according](#) to the historian John Norwich made the council ever more unpopular both with the citizens and other organs of government and

precipitated a rapid unwinding of the societal threads that had, for centuries, underpinned inclusive forms of cooperation and devotion to a governing system that aimed to realize the common good.

It is important to note that these polities had developed the governing capacity to productively address various expressions of social malfeasance, including administrative corruption and shirking and free riding among citizens that could challenge the confidence of people in each other and the government. Yet, when it was the leadership that turned away from meeting expectations—including diligence in sustaining a system of governance and maintaining its religious neutrality—all the governments in question illustrated a key vulnerability: they lacked the institutional capacity to punish leadership displaying self-serving acts contrary to the pursuit of societal benefit.

Moral Collapse and Its Relevance to Contemporary U.S. Politics

Like the societies we have discussed, the original charters of the U.S. government featured mutual moral obligations between governing authorities and citizens at their core and specified key governing precepts, including the rule of law, the peaceful transfer of power, inclusion, checks and balances on the concentration of power, and the separation of church and state. Over more than two centuries, these principles, although sometimes opposed, have largely been followed. But now they face serious challenges from the presumptive leadership of the Republican Party and influential governing bodies including the Supreme Court.

These challengers reject the notions of inclusiveness and lawfulness embedded in the original charters in a way that does not align with what the majority of American citizens believe and would like to preserve. In particular, challengers deviate from broad sensibilities both when they show strong support for the idea that white nationalist ideologies and religious fundamentalism should serve as the religious foundation for our governing practices and principles, and when they assert their belief that violence is an acceptable means to achieve political goals in the face of opposition.

We hope that our discussion of historical cases is a reminder that mutual benefit and good governance succeed or fail based on the choices of contingently cooperative citizens. Contingency implies that, as in Venice and the other cases we pointed out, the loss of citizen confidence in the leadership can trigger an unexpected unwinding of the societal threads that underpin inclusive forms of

cooperation and devotion to a governing system designed to realize common good.

By Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Lane F. Fargher-Navarro

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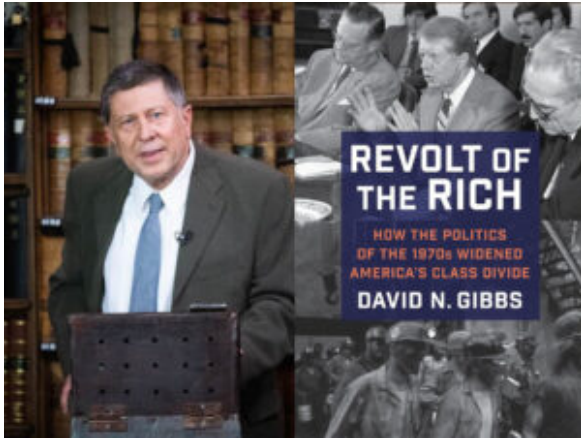
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Neoliberal Policies Associated With Reaganomics Actually Started With Carter



*Historian David N. Gibbs ~
University of Arizona*

09-03-2024 ~ *Historian David N. Gibbs, author of “The Revolt of the Rich,” says we mustn’t whitewash President Carter’s record.*

Research has long established strong links between neoliberal policies and increasing rates of inequality. [Susan George](#), for instance, argued quite convincingly that increasing inequality stems from the neoliberal practices of placing public wealth into private hands, enforcing huge tax cuts for the rich and suppressing wages for average workers. And a [recent study](#) by psychology researchers shows that neoliberalism has resulted in both preferences and support for greater income inequality. Moreover, the study in question argues that the culprit for the impact on attitudes is “Thatcherism.” Indeed, most researchers place the origins of the neoliberal counterrevolution in the postwar era with the policies initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the U.K. and the U.S., respectively.

However, a new book by the historian [David N. Gibbs](#), titled, [The Revolt of the Rich: How the Politics of the 1970s Widened America’s Class Divide](#), contends that we should look to the administrations of Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter in particular for setting up the foundations for the launching of the neoliberal counterrevolution in the United States. As such, as its author points out in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, too much credit has been assigned to the Thatcher-Reagan duo for the end of the Keynesian social democratic approach to government and economics. As Gibbs says, “We should not whitewash Carter’s record” as he was “certainly no friend to the working class.” Gibbs is professor of history at the University of Arizona.

*C. J. Polychroniou: The first three decades of the postwar era were marked by substantial economic growth and shared prosperity. Indeed, income gains were evenly distributed and the gap between those high up on the income ladder and those at the middle and bottom did not experience much change. However, economic growth slowed down during the second half of the 1970s and the income gap widened, with the very top earners pulling much further ahead since — to the point that current inequality levels today are close to those observed during the Gilded Age. The general consensus is that neoliberal policies have been at the root of extreme inequality, and the major beneficiaries of these policies are indeed the dominant classes. Moreover, the conventional view is that the first wave of neoliberalism begins in the 1980s with Reaganomics and Thatcherism, but in your recently published book, *The Revolt of the Rich*, you argue that it was actually the Nixon administration that laid the groundwork for the shift to a conservative economic platform, and that it was the Carter administration in turn that ushered in the first wave of neoliberalism.*

Can you briefly describe some of the actions that the Nixon administration took to build up political momentum for the advance of right-wing economics and what forces were involved in the rightward transformation of U.S. politics? And how did the labor movement and the progressive forces of the time respond to the rise of economic conservatism and the revolt of the rich?

David N. Gibbs: Richard Nixon aspired to be a transformational president, one who would overturn the regulated capitalism inherited from the New Deal, in favor of a free market revolution. He was influenced by the laissez faire worldview of the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, whom Nixon admired. Though Friedman never held any official position, he acted as an informal adviser to the administration. Associates of Friedman were appointed to key positions in the Departments of Treasury, Agriculture and Justice, as well as the Council of Economic Advisors, often at the recommendation of Friedman himself. Their association with the presidency helped to elevate the prestige of Friedmanite economics, a prestige that endured long after Nixon left the scene.

To amplify Friedman's message, Nixon relied on a rightist intellectual network, focused on the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a free market bastion. The president leaned on corporate executives to increase their funding of AEI, building it up as a Washington powerhouse. At the same time, the president encouraged executives to defund the centrist Brookings Institution and other

rivals to the rising AEI.

Simultaneously, Nixon mobilized social conservatives and evangelical Christians against the cultural changes of this period, including such “immoral” developments as homosexuality, abortion rights and secularism in public life. Nixon was extremely clever in melding together business and social conservatives to give conservatism a mass base of voters, forging what would soon become an unbeatable coalition.

Having laid the political groundwork, Nixon was never able to fully implement his radical vision for the future. His career was cut short by Watergate, followed by his 1974 resignation. However, the business forces that the president had unleashed developed a momentum of their own, which endured and accelerated even after he left office.

Corporate America would engage in a massive influence campaign throughout the 1970s after Watergate, using a dense network of think tanks, lobby groups and publicity agencies to spread their message, while Friedman and his academic colleagues would furnish the guiding principles. The campaign that Nixon set in motion would ultimately transform U.S. public policy, mostly toward the end of the decade.

What is surprising is how little opposition there was to the rightward campaign. The labor movement had lost its most dynamic leaders during the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s. Much of the remaining union leadership, especially George Meany of the AFL-CIO, were ineffective. Organized labor seemed much more interested in advancing anti-communist unions overseas, often in cooperation with the CIA, than they were in defending worker rights in the United States.

Many new progressive groups emerged during the 1970s, but these focused on noneconomic issues for the most part, involving race, gender and sexuality, as well as environmentalism. And the diverse progressive groups were unable to work together in a broad coalition, which limited their influence. As a result, there was no serious effort to oppose the corporate-led assault on the New Deal.

One conclusion I have drawn is that the right was far better at political strategy than the left. When the right plays the game of politics, they play to win, and they usually do.

The 1970s saw a period of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. But in your book, you also point out there were powerful forces — such as the military-industrial complex, corporate interests and the Israel lobby — that worked against détente and favored militarism. Do you see a relationship between militarism and the general turn to right-wing economics?

The 1970s produced an elite campaign aimed at increasing military spending and reinvigorating U.S. militarism after its failures in Vietnam, as well as ending détente with the Soviet Union. The lead group in this campaign was the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), backed by a wide range of corporate interests, especially weapons producers, as well as the Israel lobby. The CPD campaign was so successful that there was a major increase in military spending, which began toward the end of the Carter presidency and continued into the Reagan presidency, producing the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history. The rise in military spending had important effects on the domestic economy by diverting funds away from social programs aimed at helping the indigent.

The economic crises of this period produced deep cuts in federal spending for virtually all areas, consistent with neoliberal doctrines of budgetary austerity, but the military was exempted. The military-industrial complex benefited from this budgetary generosity. The government thus pursued a policy of militarism, to the benefit of corporate America and at the expense of the lowest income groups.

Chapter five of your book is titled “The Rich Go Global.” How does neoliberalism relate to globalization? Is there a causation or even a correlation?

The main objective of the corporate campaign was to overturn the regulated capitalism inherited from the New Deal and replace it with laissez faire capitalism. The New Deal system had been extended internationally through the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, which laid out the postwar economic architecture. Central to Bretton Woods was that currency exchange rates would be regulated by the International Monetary Fund, a newly created public institution, reducing the role of financial speculators. The purpose was to enable full employment and redistributionist policies to proceed at a global level, unimpeded by destabilizing financial speculation.

The Bretton Woods system was dismantled in the early 1970s, thus deregulating

international finance. We can credit this change to years of lobbying by bankers and conservative economists, led by the ubiquitous Friedman. The IMF lost its regulatory function, while private bankers regained their influence. Speculation in currency trading exploded, producing windfalls for bankers.

The deregulation of international finance led to what has been termed the “financialization” of the U.S. domestic economy. As a result of financialization, investors could make quick profits by engaging in speculation (typically selling off dollars, while purchasing stronger currencies), rather than through long-term investments in manufacturing. And there was usually a government bailout waiting for the banks when speculative ventures ended badly.

The new, deregulated system had a negative impact on industry, eliminating many high-paying factory jobs which were offshored to low-wage countries. This process was facilitated by the free flow of capital across borders, made possible by deregulation. The New Deal system was thus replaced by a very conservative form of globalization, one that worked against the U.S. working class.

I think it is a widely accepted fact that Jimmy Carter was, from the beginning, a conservative Democrat, but it isn't typically acknowledged that he ushered in the age of neoliberalism. Can you talk about the sort of neoliberal economic policies that Carter enforced and why you think he subordinated U.S. society to the logic and power of “free markets?”

The move toward free market economics was finally implemented during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. While Nixon had laid the foundations for a later conservative transformation, it was President Carter who first set forth these policies on a large scale. He was keenly focused on removing industrial regulations inherited from the New Deal.

A central figure was Carter's deregulation adviser, Alfred Kahn, a Cornell University professor. I have examined Kahn's private papers and was stunned by the intensity of his anti-labor ideology. Under the influence of Kahn, Carter deregulated multiple industrial sectors, beginning with airlines, which had the effect of permanently reducing wages. Carter also deregulated domestic finance, intensifying the process of financialization begun during Nixon's presidency, with additional negative effects on wage earners.

Carter's economic conservatism was expressed in multiple domains, including

regressive taxation “reforms,” which increased the tax burden on wage earners, while it reduced taxation of investors. And Carter began the process of using monetary policy as a means of fighting inflation by reducing wages and increasing unemployment. He was certainly no friend to the working class.

Your book makes it quite clear that the neoliberal policies associated with Reaganomics and Thatcherism actually started with Carter. Why is it then that neoliberalism in the U.S. has been pinned on Ronald Reagan?

According to popular mythology, Carter was a relatively centrist figure, while Reagan was a right-wing ideologue; it was Reagan who inaugurated the neoliberal era in economic policy, according to this view. But the reality is that Reagan only intensified a rightward turn that was already in full swing under Carter. Why the persistence of this myth, that Carter was a political moderate? I think the reason is that Reagan used conservative, ideological language to justify his policies, proudly emphasizing his free market orientation, so he received all the credit for America’s right turn in economic policy, while Carter preferred non-ideological language, which masked the essentially Friedmanite character of his economic program.

Another factor influencing public perception has been Carter’s post-presidency, which is very impressive. But Carter must also be judged on the basis of his presidency, which transformed the country in a far more inegalitarian direction than had been the case previously. We should not whitewash Carter’s record.

How do we explain the lasting impact of the revolt of the rich?

The long-term impact of the revolt of the rich has been to elevate the influence of money in U.S. politics. I emphasize the importance of what has been termed “deep lobbying,” which seeks to influence public opinion. Deep lobbying goes well beyond the traditional conception of lobbying that focuses on short-term goals, such as advancing specific pieces of legislation. The purpose of deep lobbying is to transform politics over the long term by altering the climate of discussion. The upsurge of deep lobbying in the 1970s permanently shifted the balance of power toward the economic elite; it was an elite takeover.

An outstanding example of deep lobbying is the contemporary role of Charles Koch of Koch Industries and a series of Koch-connected billionaires who have used their vast wealth to set up free market think tanks at hundreds of colleges

and universities across the United States, including at my own institution, the University of Arizona. Koch's aim is to use educational institutions to spread free market ideas and to deepen still further the laissez faire revolution begun in the 1970s.

While everyone has focused on the superficial culture wars, Koch has been promoting laissez faire economics, deregulation and income inequality. The beauty of deep lobbying is that it is done through stealth, so it does not even look like lobbying.

The main impact of the revolt of the rich was to make the United States a far less democratic country.

Source:

<https://truthout.org/articles/neoliberal-policies-associated-with-reaganomics-actually-started-with-carter/>

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam

Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Joseph Sassoon Semah: On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) V - Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere



At the end of September 2024, the richly illustrated, English-language publication *Joseph Sassoon Semah: On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) V - Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere* will be released.

Featuring artworks and texts by Joseph Sassoon Semah, Linda Bouws, A.S. Bruckstein Çoruh / House of Taswir, Guus van Engelshoven, Arie Hartog, Gideon Ofrat, Jom Semah, Lisette Pelsers, David Sperber, Steve Austen, and Rick Vercauteren.

'Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere' is released on the occasion of the exhibition *'On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) V - Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere'* (February 4 - June 30, 2024, Museum Het Nieuwe Domein, Sittard), curated by Guus van Engelshoven.

This fifth and final edition of Joseph Sassoon Semah's 'Magnum Opus' marks the culmination of a profound multi-year art manifestation that began in 2015. Together with curator Linda Bouws, Sassoon Semah has embarked on a mission to augment Western art history by filling its 'empty page' with the rich and diverse iconography of Jewish culture. It has been an amazing journey for the last ten years.

Joseph Sassoon Semah takes us on a wondrous journey of exploration. This journey extends from the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, through the lost public space (Jewish Quarter) of Baghdad, the waiting room of his Saba (grandfather) and the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, to spatial architecture based on the typography of the Talmud Bavli.

The title of the publication '*Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere*' alludes to life in Galut, no motherland or physical cultural heritage to return to (personal graveyard), as well as the Western concept of museum, which already erased the knowledge of the layers of Jewish imagery/meaning that are being used by the Western art production (universal graveyard). Each of Sassoon Semah's artworks serves as a witness to the profound loss, and at the same time reclaiming the lost world and making Jewish culture, symbols, tradition, and identity visible in a different cultural environment. He demands recognition and acknowledgement of the lost knowledge of Judaism; in this way he is trying to liberate himself from his dis-placement. He offers an alternative reading about the role of the museums and the authority of art history.

About the publication

Metropool International Art Projects

Final editing: Linda Bouws & Joseph Sassoon Semah

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The publication can now be ordered:

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To order, transfer payment to: Stichting Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten, account number NL 42 INGB 0006 9281 68, stating 'On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) V', along with your name and address.

Joseph Sassoon Semah: On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) V - Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere



Eind september 2024 verschijnt de rijk geïllustreerde, Engelstalige publicatie *Joseph Sassoon Semah: On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) V - Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere*.

Met veel kunst en teksten van Joseph Sassoon Semah, Linda Bouws (curator, directeur Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten), A.S. Bruckstein Çoruh / House of Taswir, Guus van Engelshoven (conservator Museum Het Nieuwe Domein, Sittard), Arie Hartog (algemeen directeur Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen), Gideon Ofrat (kunsthistoricus, curator, criticus), Lisette Pelsers (kunsthistoricus), Jom Semah (kunstenaar), David Sperber (kunsthistoricus, curator, criticus), Steve Austen (international cultural entrepreneur) en Rick Vercauteren (kunsthistoricus en publicist).

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Over de publicatie

Deze vijfde en laatste editie van Joseph Sassoon Semah's 'Magnum Opus' markeert de culminatie van een diepgaande meerjarige kunstmanifestatie die begon in 2015. Samen met curator Linda

Bouws heeft Sassoon Semah de westerse kunstgeschiedenis aangevuld, door haar 'lege pagina' te voorzien van de rijke en diverse joodse iconografie.

Op het eerste gezicht lijken een begraafplaats en een museumzaal weinig gemeen te hebben. Toch geven ze beide betekenis aan de kunstwerken die Joseph Sassoon Semah (Bagdad, 1948) presenteert in de tentoonstelling *Between Graveyard and Museum's Sphere* (4 februari - 30 juni 2024, Museum Het Nieuwe Domein, Sittard), curator Guus van Engelshoven. Hij neemt ons mee op een wonderlijke verkenningreis. Deze reis strekt zich uit van de Tempel van koning Salomon in Jeruzalem, via de verloren gewaande publieke ruimte (joods kwartier) van Bagdad, de wachtkamer van zijn Saba (grootvader) en het vernietigingskamp Auschwitz-Birkenau, naar de ruimtelijke architectuur gebaseerd op de typografie van de Talmud Bavli.

Elk kunstwerk van Sassoon Semah dient als getuige van het diepe verlies van kennis van de joodse betekenislaag, en tegelijkertijd herovert hij die verloren wereld en maakt de joodse cultuur, symbolen, traditie en identiteit in een andere culturele omgeving zichtbaar.

Hij en de auteurs in de publicatie bieden een alternatieve lezing over zijn kunst en de rol van musea en de autoriteit van de westerse kunstgeschiedenis.

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