What Happened To Our Ape Ancestors?

06 – 03 -2024 ~ Millions of years ago, in the Miocene Epoch (23 to 5.3 million years ago), about 100 species of apes roamed Europe, Asia, and Africa. Just a few million years later, this number had drastically declined, presenting fascinating questions for today's paleoanthropologists.

What happened to the extinct species, which have been identified in Eurasian fossil remains over recent decades? How did some apes of these species persist and evolve? And, the most hotly debated question: Did the apes who were our human ancestors originate in Africa or Eurasia?

The traditional view, following Darwin, hypothesizes an African origin for both humans and modern apes. More recent fossil evidence supports a Eurasian origin for the ancestors of humans and modern apes, which migrated back into Africa, about 7 to 9 million years ago, before modern humans evolved from them. But even proponents of this Eurasian origin view acknowledge that not enough is known yet to be certain.

The Miocene Environment

The Miocene Epoch is known for its abundance of fossils from different geographical regions, including a wide variety of mammals. Over the epoch's nearly 18-million-year span, the Earth's climate and geography changed dramatically. The beginning of the epoch was warmer than the prior Oligocene, the mid-Miocene period is known as the Miocene Climatic Optimum, and the late Miocene was marked by cooling.

Over this epoch, the continents, seas, and elevations were shifting toward their present positions. As sea levels dropped around 16.5 million years ago, a land bridge between Africa and Eurasia permitted a migration of many species from Africa to Eurasia including apes. Fossil evidence suggests that some ape species

made their way from Africa through Saudi Arabia.

Over a few million years in their new Eurasian environment, ape species proliferated and thrived, developing new physical characteristics, including larger brains. Toronto University anthropologist David R. Begun described these evolutionary changes as a preadaptation to "coping with the problems of a radically changing environment."

Later in the Miocene, the seas rose and cooler temperatures transformed the subtropical forest habitat in Eurasia into dry grasslands with more seasonal conditions. The many species of apes that had flourished in Eurasia no longer had an abundant food supply of fruits and an ape-friendly habitat. As Begun wrote in a 2006 Scientific American article, "Climate changes in the Late Miocene brought an end to this easy living."

The available Eurasian fossil data indicate that many ape species died out by about 9 million years ago. But a few species, including our human hominid ancestor, were able to adapt to the vast environmental changes and made their way south, back to Africa. (Hominid is the term for great apes, humans, and all their fossil relatives.)

The fossil record from Eurasia provides clues to how some ape species developed those traits that allowed them to adapt to climate and environment changes, in order to migrate into Eurasia and later back to Africa.

Who Were the Miocene Apes?
Paleoanthropologists identify ape population groups from millions of years ago by meticulously analyzing data from fossil remains, often only from fossil fragments. From teeth, jaw, brain size, bone shape, slope of skull and nose, and other physical clues, scientists differentiate species, characterize evolutionary changes, and infer behavior.

Some fossils of Miocene apes have characteristics that begin to resemble those of humans, such as more modern teeth and jaw structure or whether they got around via ground or treetops. Paleoanthropologists have systemized lists of species and families on timelines, but interpretations of the role of Miocene apes in hominid history vary, and uncertainties persist.

David Begun identified the genus (family of closely related species) of

Griphopithecus as "the best candidate for the earliest hominid" in his 2010 analysis of Miocene hominids in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

Griphopithecus appeared about 16 million years ago in Germany and Turkey. Their thickly enameled teeth and powerful jaws, Begun suggests, gave them the ability to take advantage of resources in varied environments. When the climate became drier, the *Griphopithecus* could adapt from eating soft fruit to a harder food supply like nuts and roots.

Our Human Ancestors

Other Miocene ape families also developed characteristics that make them our potential human ancestors. The *Dryopithecus* genus had physical aspects that resemble those of early humans, such as a face profile that tilts downward and a larger brain case. A related Miocene ape found in Greece, *Ouranopithecus*, also had some more modern ape characteristics.

More recently, a finding from central Anatolia in Turkey, reported in Communications Biology in 2023, presents more evidence of ape development in the Miocene with more human-like characteristics. A well-preserved skull initially thought to be *Ouranopithecus*, was found to have distinctive enough characteristics to be named *Anadoluvius*.

Many questions remain. For example, when did the adaptations (like knuckle-walking) occur that precede bipedalism, getting around upright on two feet?

Paleoanthropologist Robert Foley suggests that "[t]he significant factor that is key to understanding the emergence of the early bipedal hominins is the change in climate and environment that occurs at the end of the Miocene and into the Early Pliocene." He explains that it led to a pronounced global cooling, and generally in Africa, a drier climate that reduced forest cover and expanded the number of savanna environments. This provided a general evolutionary "basis for adaption to terrestrial environments," rather than arboreal ones.

A Plausible Scenario

The overall picture of when the specific characteristics of our human ancestors appeared has a plausible answer:

The proliferation of ape families and species in Eurasia, as documented in hundreds of fossils, supports the scenario that apes migrated from Africa around

16 million years ago, thrived and diversified in Eurasia along with many other animals, and then, using their evolutionary adaptations, began to make their way back to Africa at the end of the Miocene, about 7 million years ago, when the climate changed.

This is a round-trip scenario. Apes originated in Africa and migrated to Eurasia where they developed the preconditions for evolving into humans. Then the ape species that survived climate change returned to Africa where the human lineage developed.

Another piece of evidence supporting this hypothesis is that there is no fossil evidence of great apes in Africa between about 13.5 million years ago and 7 million years ago—the period when families of these apes proliferated in Eurasia. This is despite many known African fossil sites from that period.

A Continuing Evolution

The scenario presented here took place over millions of years. Paleoanthropologists are not in complete agreement about where human-like characteristics developed. It will take the discovery of many more fossils from Eurasia and Africa to settle this history.

Meanwhile, as some have pointed out, there's a lesson here for today's evolving humans facing climate change, other environmental changes, and the challenge of space exploration. How will today's human beings adapt?

By Marjorie Hecht

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Source: Human Bridges

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PVV Blog 9 ~ An Ideology Of Exclusion In Power

06-03-2024 ~ On May 16th, the Dutch Party for Freedom PVV, the liberal party VVD, the New Social Contract party NSC, and the Farmer Citizen Movement BBB, presented the coalition agreement for the upcoming cabinet. In my previous blog, I already addressed the content of the agreement. Naturally, I followed the nature of the reactions with interest. How would the Dutch public respond, and how would the opposition in parliament react?

Debate in the House of Representatives

On Thursday, May 22nd, a debate took place in the House of Representatives about the coalition agreement. I watched it, and I found it confronting. Normally, Party for Freedom leader Geert Wilders is the leader of the opposition, but now he spoke from the podium as the leader of the new coalition. He is or will soon become the most powerful person in the Netherlands once the new cabinet is installed. And he was already taking a step ahead: sovereign, sharp, and very experienced in debating, he parried all attacks from the opposition, and his three future coalition partners also closed ranks.

Polls

Polls among the Dutch public showed that the new center-radical-right government is reasonably well-received. This cabinet is rated higher than previous ones, particularly the last one, led by VVD leader Mark Rutte, who will soon step down after 14 years as prime minister and may become the new secretary-general of NATO. It is not surprising that the reception of this new cabinet is positive; after all, the PVV gained a quarter of the votes in the November 2023 elections, which naturally translates into a positive response.

The Opposition Paralyzed

The opposition in the chamber presented two main arguments: firstly, that this new coalition pays little attention to the poorest in the country, that it strengthens the financial position of businesses, and that is has planned unfeasible cuts, such as reducing the number of civil servants. The latter is unfeasible precisely

because there are many vacancies in various ministries. The cabinet also envisions the strictest possible migration policy and believes that it will save billions. How these measures, often contrary to Brussels and international regulations, can save money is a question, but the Party for Freedom leader was not deterred in the debate. He believed in the measures, and if they didn't work, then "we will see that later."

An Ideology of Division

In my view, the opposition faced a major dilemma, namely dealing with predominantly positive reactions from the Dutch public. For instance, Frans Timmermans, the social-democratic leader of the opposition, was soon dismissed as a grump. He hammered on all the shortcomings of the proposed program, but he and other opposition parties faced the difficulty of articulating the fact that behind this coalition and its agreement lies an ideology of sowing division among people. The Party for Freedom and its leader are deliberately spreading a toxic ideology of inequality, especially concerning the Muslim community in the Netherlands. However, the coalition agreement hardly mentions this inequality explicitly. It speaks of various measures, and the inequality is not easily read between the lines. This made it difficult for the opposition to sharply attack the coalition agreement, and thus Wilders and his partners came through the debate relatively unscathed.

Who Will Be the New Prime Minister?

A lingering question was who would become the prime minister of this new cabinet. The agreement between the four coalition parties was that the faction leaders would all remain in the House, including Party for Freedom leader Wilders. This was against his will, but it was part of the price he had to pay to form this cabinet. The other coalition parties were against a "Prime Minister Wilders." Ultimately, the parties found a suitable candidate in their eyes: the seasoned top civil servant Dick Schoof (67 years old), who has worked for many years in various ministries and institutions on security, anti-terrorism policy, and the like. He is the embodiment of a civil servant, and it's no wonder Forum for Democracy leader Thierry Baudet scoffed on X: "37 seats for an anti-establishment populist on November 22 (date of the elections last year, JJdR). And you get… the embodiment of the establishment. Incredible." It seems that Mr. Schoof was pushed forward through backroom dealings and with the approval of current Prime Minister Rutte. Mr. Schoof is a former Labor Party member but has

resigned his membership.
It is a bizarre and unprecedented situation in Dutch politics that a coalition is formed with a certain coalition agreement, and then a man or woman is sought to execute this program.
Mr. Schoof had no input in the negotiations over the agreement and its final result. But that he supports it is beyond doubt: otherwise, he would never have agreed to become prime minister.

Concerns from Mosques
Regarding the exclusionary ideology of the coalition I mentioned earlier, one can only expect a reinforcement of it from Mr. Schoof. In the past, he has regularly pushed the boundaries of the law regarding mosques and Muslims in the Netherlands, and has also crossed them. It is no coincidence that mosques in the Netherlands issued a statement saying: "The fundamental rights of Muslims have been under pressure for some time, and with the arrival of this prime minister, who must lead a coalition where the Party for Freedom calls the shots, it is a bit like giving a bunch of bullies brass knuckles." And: "In a mature, democratic constitutional state, citizens should not have to fear an incoming prime minister and a new cabinet. Unfortunately, this is now the case."

I agree with the words of the mosque federation. The socio-economic measures proposed by this cabinet will hopefully withstand democratic criticism, but ideologically, this cabinet is a disaster for the country. As Sita Sitalsing, a columnist for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, wrote: "Unnoticed, the parties have swum into the Party for Freedoms's trap."
And: "The country is heading towards an unpredictable government that constantly tests and tries to cross the boundaries of propriety and the law. This affects the certainties and protections of everyone living in this country. What remains is a bad taste."

These are sharp words from the mosques, the columnist, and many others, but I think this coalition, knowing it is supported by 'the people in the country,' will unwaveringly implement its program and spread the poison of exclusion in the process. I will keep an eye on it for you in future installments of this series.

How Prehistoric Humans Discovered Fire Making

Deborah Barsky

05-29-2024 ~ Of all the pivotal technologies discovered by humans, fire making was the one that gifted our species with power beyond all others.

An ancient Greek myth tells the story of Prometheus, who, after molding humans out of clay and teaching them the fine arts of civilization, defied the Olympian Gods by stealing the secret of fire and offering it to humans. Prometheus paid dearly for this act of transgression that doted humankind with unprecedented technological know-how ultimately transforming their condition into one of great power.

The moral behind the Promethean archetype is a cautionary one, intended to warn us about the risks attached to the unbridled pursuit of technology that can inadvertently result in catastrophic scenarios. The Prometheus myth underscores not only the formidable power that individuals may come to possess by defying authority in the quest to develop science and technology but also suggests that anyone who does so will suffer the consequences.

It is significant that the Greeks chose fire as the subject to deliver this warning. Without a doubt, the capacity to produce and control fire stands out among the most transformative technological feats achieved by our prehistoric ancestors;

one that ultimately consolidated human planetary domination. But how, when, and where did early humans harness the technologies necessary to master fire making? What does the archeological record tell us about how they finally obtained the Promethean secret of fire making?

Like other milestones marking the human evolutionary pathway (like perfecting stone axes or mastering advanced hunting practices), the know-how required to make, use, and control fire evolved progressively, encouraged by human ingenuity and, probably also, by trial and error. Fire making techniques were perfected over time and transmitted socially, while different human groups explored the multifaceted revolutionary potential offered by controlling it. Before truly mastering fire making, early humans may have experienced a precedent phase during which they used fire passively, gathering, preserving and even transporting brazes ignited by natural causes (lightning, spontaneous combustion, etc.), prior to learning how to actively generate and control it. In the meantime, curiosity led them to explore the mysterious properties of fire, while also inspiring them to seek ways to master its secrets.

While looking back in time, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when our ancestors began to control fire-making technologies. Recognizing intentionally ignited and sustained fires in archeological contexts poses challenges since the simple presence of burned bones and stones or localized areas of charred soils are not sufficient to prove that hominins were actively producing fire. Before 1 million years ago, sparse evidence from some African sites could suggest that hominins were opportunistically harvesting fire from naturally kindled blazes; rather than practicing truly operative fire making. However, a multidisciplinary study from the Wonderwerk Cave in South Africa reports convincing evidence for intentional burning in a controlled archeological context dated to 1 million years old.

While such early signals of fire making are rare and difficult to recognize and interpret, globally, the *ability to set fire at will* is heralded as a major groundbreaking accomplishment attributed to the *Homo erectus* lineage who lived during the Lower Paleolithic period. This group of hominins is known to have produced an impressive array of tools belonging to the so-called Acheulian industrial complex that emerged in Africa 1.75 million years ago. Fire making is not the only groundbreaking achievement marking the 1.4 million-year-long reign of the Acheulian peoples. Throughout this time, hominins invented and came to master highly complex technological achievements, documented archeologically

in the form of stone and (sometimes) bone tools. These technologies facilitated the expansion of *H. erectus* populations into Eurasia, where they continued to perfect and diversify the toolkits that afforded them adaptive advantages; improving their ability to multiply and flourish.

Aside from their broadening cultural repertoire, parallel processes of social development (more difficult to recognize in the archeological record) were also taking place. Rising demography is manifest in both Africa and Eurasia from the exponential increases in the number, density, and variety of archeological sites: a phenomenon that must in turn have generated more frequent interpopulational encounters, assuring reproductive viability and offering opportunities for cultural transmission at various levels. Acheulian hominins began to organize themselves into functional collective units that allowed them to more effectively share and exchange their newfound skills: a strategy that would ultimately favor their survival.

It is only after the 1-million-year mark that the global repercussions of the consolidation of fire-making technologies become more clearly visible in some archeological contexts outside of Africa. At the Acheulian site of Gesher Benot Ya'aqov, in the Jordan Valley, for example, compelling evidence some 780,000 years old confirms that hominins were not only *making fire at will*but were also deliberately cooking fish. Meanwhile, as far away as China, but in a similar timeframe (800,000 to 600,000 years ago), there is proof in the famous multi-leveled Acheulian cave site of Zhoukoudian that individuals belonging to an Asian strain of *H. erectus* were also successfully experimenting with controlled burning in occupational settings.

Despite these rare and ancient occurrences, indications that hominins were actively generating and controlling fire became more ubiquitous only thousands of years later, toward the end of the Acheulian phase (after around 400,000 years ago), and then even more frequent as we move into the Eurasian Middle Paleolithic and African Middle Stone Age. Technological and behavioral diversity multiplies exponentially from this time forward, as toolkits differentiate to form complex formal manifestations of culture. Importantly, dwellings (often in caves) become recognizable *provisioned home bases*, where hominins returned regularly (or seasonally) over many generations. For the first time, organized living spaces can be identified within base camp settings that were structured around easily recognizable combustion structures, or hearths.

So, while *H. erectus* is credited with initiating the fire-making revolution sometime during the early phases of the Acheulian, it is only much later that the Pre-Neandertals and other forms of pre-modern and modern *Homo*thriving in Eurasia at the end of this period began to more intensively experiment with the enormous potential offered by the Promethean gift of fire. Around 350,000 years ago, on the eve of the shift from the Lower to the Middle Paleolithic, the prevalence of hearths within prehistoric living spaces signals important changes taking place in hominin lifestyles.

Making fire was interwoven with many social, technological, and behavioral developments that triggered major changes that would shape humanity from that point onward. While (rather surprisingly) fire does not seem to have been a requirement for hominins expanding to territories situated in higher latitudes, it would have helped facilitate their capacity to take root in areas dominated by harsh or unstable climatic conditions. In terms of hunting, fire-wielding hominins would have had huge advantages over other kinds of carnivores with whom they competed for resources; fire also guaranteed the safety and protection of their own communities.

Besides taking advantage of these benefits, our ancestors experimented extensively with fire over thousands of years and grasped the significance of its power to transform the properties of other materials available in the landscape. They eventually learned to use fire to improve their weaponry (like heating flint to improve its knapping quality) and to assemble composite implements by hafting pointed stone tools onto branches using adhesives prepared with heat—such as tar and ocher. In addition, cooking food must radically have transformed the hominin diet, reducing the likelihood of contracting bacterial diseases and parasites from meat and other foodstuffs, while opening up innovative pathways toward enlarging the paleo diet (boiling, smoking, drying, etc.).

But among all of the spectacular changes afforded to prehistoric humans by the mastery of fire perhaps the most important and most difficult to assess archeologically is the social impact it must have had. With fire, humans were finally able to dompt the darkness and linger with confidence into the night, gathered together in proximity to hearths that afforded them warmth, light, and comfort. This leads us to postulate a variety of socially related activities, like storytelling or other communal rituals. While it is impossible to measure the impact of this complex series of events that so indelibly affected human evolution,

we can still discern how technology and culture were interwoven to catalyze the advancement of symbolic communication within the developing brains of our ancestors, finally grouped into distinct territorial social units.

Later still, during the Middle and Upper Paleolithic periods, our human predecessors used firelight to venture into deep cave systems to perform ritual activities and create art on the cave walls, bringing it to life with the play of torchlight. Toward the end of the Paleolithic, humans continued to explore the powerful transformative qualities of fire, eventually learning to obtain and maintain the high temperatures necessary to transform clay into pottery and, later, to melt metal ores into usable items that would, once again, revolutionize the human story.

Even today, fire remains a powerful force whose symbolic meaning is deeply rooted within our collective unconsciousness. Though Prometheus was eventually delivered from his torment, his transgression still resonates as a lesson to humankind's defiant striving to master transformative technologies without heeding the looming dangers posed by the unforeseen consequences of such actions.

By Deborah Barsky

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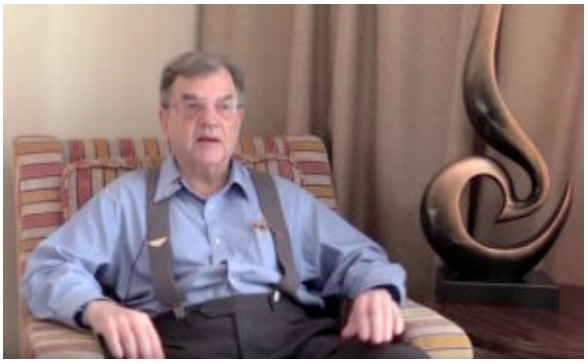
Some Myths Regarding The Genesis Of Enterprise



Michael Hudson

05-22-2024 ~ Not only were "modern" elements of enterprise present and even dominant already in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC, but the institutional context was conducive to long-term growth.

If a colloquium on early entrepreneurs had been convened in the early 20th century, most participants would have viewed traders as operating on their own, bartering at prices that settled at a market equilibrium established spontaneously in response to fluctuating supply and demand. According to the Austrian economist Carl Menger, money emerged as individuals and merchants involved in barter came to prefer silver and copper as convenient means of payment, stores of value, and standards by which to measure other prices. History does not support this individualistic scenario for how commercial practices developed in the spheres of trade, money and credit, interest, and pricing. Rather than emerging spontaneously among individuals "trucking and bartering," money, credit, pricing, and investment for the purpose of creating profits, charging interest, creating a property market and even a proto-bond market (for temple prebends) first emerged in the temples and palaces of Sumer and Babylonia.

The First Mints Were Temples

From third-millennium Mesopotamia through classical antiquity the minting of precious metal of specified purity was carried out by temples, not private suppliers. The word *money* derives from Rome's temple of Juno Moneta, where the city's coinage was minted in early times. Monetized silver was part of the

Near Eastern pricing system developed by large institutions to establish stable ratios for their fiscal account-keeping and forward planning. Major price ratios (including the rate of interest) were administered in round numbers for ease of calculation [1].

The Palace Forgave Excessive Debt

Instead of deterring enterprise, these administered prices provided a stable context for it to flourish. The palace estimated a normal return for the fields and other properties it leased out, and left managers to make a profit—or to suffer a loss when the weather was bad or other risks materialized. In such cases shortfalls became debts. However, when the losses became so great as to threaten this system, the palace let the agrarian arrears go, enabling entrepreneurial contractors with the palatial economy (including ale women) to start again with a clean slate. The aim was to keep them in business, not to destroy them.

Flexible Pricing Beyond the Palace

Rather than a conflict existing between the large public institutions administering prices and mercantile enterprise, there was a symbiotic relationship. Mario Liverani [2] points out that administered pricing by the temples and palaces vis-à-vis *tamkarum* merchants engaged in foreign trade "was limited to the starting move and the closing move: trade agents got silver and/or processed materials (that is, mainly metals and textiles) from the central agency and had to bring back after six months or a year the equivalent in exotic products or raw materials. The economic balance between central agency and trade agents could not but be regulated by fixed exchange values. But the merchants' activity once they left the palace was completely different: They could freely trade, playing on the different prices of the various items in various countries, even using their money in financial activities (such as loans) in the time at their disposal, and making the maximum possible personal profit."

Mesopotamian Institutions Boosted the Commercial Takeoff

A century ago it was assumed that the state's economic role could only have taken the form of oppressive taxation and overregulation of markets, and hence would have thwarted commercial enterprise. That is how Michael Rostovtzeff [3] depicted the imperial Roman economy stifling the middle class. But A.H.M. Jones [4] pointed out that this was how antiquity ended, not how it began. Merchants and entrepreneurs first emerged in conjunction with the temples and

palaces of Mesopotamia. Rather than being despotic and economically oppressive, Mesopotamian institutions and religious values sanctioned the commercial takeoff that ended up being thwarted in Greece and Rome. Archaeology has confirmed that "modern" elements of enterprise were present and even dominant already in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC, and that the institutional context was conducive to long-term growth. Commerce expanded and fortunes were made as populations grew and the material conditions of life rose. But what has surprised many observers is how much more successful, fluid, and more stable economic organization was as we move back in time.

Ex Oriente Lux

Growing awareness that the character of gain-seeking became economically predatory has prompted a more sociological view of exchange and property in Greece and Rome (e.g., the French structuralists, Leslie Kurke[5] and Sitta von Reden[6], and also a more "economic" post-Polanyian view of earlier Mesopotamia and its Near Eastern neighbors. Morris and Manning[7] survey how the approach that long segregated Near Eastern from Mediterranean development has been replaced by a more integrated view[8,9] in tandem with a pan-regional approach to myth, religion,[10,11] and art works.[12] The motto *ex oriente lux* now is seen to apply to commercial practices as well as to art, culture, and religion.

Individualism Was a Symptom of Westward Decline

For a century, Near Eastern development was deemed to lie outside the Western continuum, which was defined as starting with classical Greece circa 750 BC. But the origins of commercial practices are now seen to date from Mesopotamia's takeoff two thousand years before classical antiquity. However, what was indeed novel and "fresh" in the Mediterranean lands arose mainly from the fact that the Bronze Age world fell apart in the devastation that occurred circa 1200 BC. The commercial and debt practices that Syrian and Phoenician traders brought to the Aegean and southern Italy around the eighth century BC were adopted in smaller local contexts that lacked the public institutions found throughout the Near East. Trade and usury enriched chieftains much more than occurred in the Near East where temples or other public authority were set corporately apart to mediate the economic surplus, and especially to provide credit. Because the societies of classical antiquity emerged in this non-public and indeed oligarchic context, the idea of *Western* became synonymous with the private sector and individualism.

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By Michael Hudson

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Source: Human Bridges

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Tags: Social Science, History, Economy, Opinion

Defending Privacy In The Surveillance State And Fragmenting Internet

John P. Ruehl – Source: Independent Media Institute

05-20-2024 ~ *Governments and private entities have steadily eroded privacy on the internet. The trend toward internet functions centralizing within national borders and fragmenting internationally reinforces the need to safeguard both openness and security in cyberspace.*

Following the reapproval of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) on April 20, 2024, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer proudly declared that "bipartisanship has prevailed here in the Senate." Despite the increasing rarity of

bipartisanship in recent years, support for government surveillance continues to unite large majorities across party lines. Established in 1978, FISA allows government surveillance and data collection of individuals suspected of espionage or terrorism within the U.S., marking one of the many mechanisms aiming to ensure total federal oversight of communications.

Governments ranging from democracies to dictatorships, socialist to capitalist have all developed policies and bureaucracies for maximum data collection and mass surveillance as their populations become digitized. The centralized nature of modern communications grids facilitates many forms of surveillance. As internet services centralize domestically and the internet fragments internationally, countering government and private sector abuse of surveillance or developing alternative systems will require steady public pressure and some ingenuity to attain real enforcement.

One of the takeaways that a review of the history of modern surveillance, from the early days of the telephone to so-called privacy apps like Signal, tells us is that efforts to escape, undermine, and subvert the surveillance efforts of governments tend to be counterproductive. They are often originated by states themselves as part of a dialectic process that enables more comprehensive surveillance in a series of stages or just produces greater surveillance infrastructure in response to the attempt to develop alternative communications systems.

In the pre-internet era, authorities would tap into telegraph and later telephone lines to intercept communications, often requiring access to the physical infrastructure of the networks. Mail sent by post could meanwhile be intercepted and opened. As communication systems evolved, so too did government techniques to surveil them. The switch from copper wire phone systems to fiber optic cables and the spread of the internet initially threatened the NSA's ability to monitor communications, for example, until the Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act (CALEA) in 1994. Communications companies were required to build back doors for the NSA to monitor remotely, while the NSA also clandestinely worked on developing technologies to monitor communications.

U.S. domestic surveillance powers have been routinely updated during the 21st Century, including the enactment of the 2001 PATRIOT Act, the 2015 Cybersecurity Information Sharing Act (CISA), and the 2018 FISA reauthorization. The 2013 Snowden Leaks revealed the NSA asked for funding to

“insert vulnerabilities into commercial encryption systems”, and it is constantly pushing for backdoors into encryption software to access communications and devices. Major mobile carriers acknowledge the inclusion of preinstalled surveillance and data mining technology in devices supported by Google, Apple, and Microsoft, while the NSA’s PRISM program extracts data from all major technology companies with or without their consent.

U.S. companies primarily cooperate with the U.S. government under the banner of “surveillance capitalism,” allowing them to capitalize on their data and surveillance capabilities both for government and private endeavors. Similar to other countries, most of the U.S. internet traffic now flows through a handful of large entities rather than numerous smaller ones. Furthermore, U.S. user data is also more available to the private sector compared to that of EU citizens, with companies like Facebook and Google even compiling dossiers on non-users to enhance targeted advertising.

In addition to ad monetization, lax privacy laws also play a role in security. Established in 1976, the third-party doctrine allows U.S. law enforcement to access user data without a warrant. The Ring video system, acquired by Amazon in 2018, created hundreds of partnerships with U.S. police departments to help them gain access to user recordings, while numerous other companies actively provide law enforcement agencies with access to user data.

The issue extends beyond monetization and law enforcement. Political actors have recognized the potential of data to shape politics. In 2018, Facebook faced scrutiny when it was revealed that private company Cambridge Analytica was permitted to access user data and target them with political ads to influence their voting behavior. Moreover, anti-abortion groups have caused controversy by using location data to send ads to those who visited Planned Parenthood centers.

Of similar concern is the abuse of data by employees. In 2017, reports surfaced of employees of Ring doorbell company spying on female users, while Amazon’s Alexa retained recordings of children long after parents requested their deletion. Hackers have also accessed user data and feeds of Ring customer cameras across the U.S.

Alongside extensive domestic surveillance and data collection methods, the expansion of the internet in the 1990s led to a surge in global U.S. surveillance

and data collection capabilities. Despite the promotion of a "global multi-stakeholder model of internet governance", U.S.-based Organizations like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), and Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C), allowed Washington considerable control over the governance, standards-setting, and the activities of major internet actors. While these advantages for Washington may have declined since the 1990s, the rise of Big Tech and other factors guarantee the U.S. ongoing influence over much of the internet.

The disclosure of ECHELON in the 1990s exposed a global signals intelligence (SIGINT) network operated by the U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Five Eyes), while the Snowden leaks in 2013 uncovered further aspects of the surveillance alliance. Significant data sharing also occurs between the U.S. and European countries, often facilitated through organizations like NATO.

The 2022 interception of a British citizen's Snapchat message about a potential plane bombing, leading to the escorting of the plane by the Spanish air force, demonstrates strong Western data and surveillance collaboration. Multilateral efforts are supplemented by national measures like France's Intelligence Act and the UK's "Snooper's Charter."

Nonetheless, the U.S.-led internet faces mounting challenges as various blocs and countries impose restrictions and tighten control over their networks. The Snowden leaks exposed the ability of the Five Eyes to circumvent their domestic spy laws and even target high-profile officials like the German chancellor. Partly in response to the leaks, the EU introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018 to limit data intrusion by foreign states and corporations and improve regulations on data collection.

Countries more hostile to Washington are also asserting greater autonomy over their data and communications networks, leading to more apparent cracks in the global internet. The Russian government's takeover of Russian social media site VKontakte in 2014 and increasing pressure on Telegram and Yandex in recent years have helped reinforce the Kremlin's concept of a "sovereign internet." The Russian government has conducted several trial runs of disconnecting the country from the global internet, while its efforts to centralize control and quell dissident opinion have intensified since the launch of the war in Ukraine, including blocking access to Western sites.

Moscow has also been re-establishing surveillance and data-sharing agreements with Central Asian states since the Soviet collapse, using these arrangements to target Russians who fled abroad after the invasion of Ukraine. China's autonomy from the U.S.-dominated internet infrastructure is more advanced, and in Central Asia and other regions, Chinese companies vie with Russian counterparts for the export of surveillance and data collection technologies.

Notably, Western companies have played an influential role in assisting authoritarian governments to enhance their communications control and reduce dependence on U.S.-led internet infrastructure. U.S. corporations like Cisco helped build the "Great Firewall of China" and domestic surveillance capabilities, while Palantir assisted the United Arab Emirates. Nokia meanwhile contributed to Russia's development of its System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM), which has also been replicated across Central Asia.

In response to concerns over decreasing privacy from government surveillance and private sector data collection, various initiatives have emerged in the decades since the internet appeared. These range from underground forums to marketplaces for illicit goods and servers, as well as blockchain technology, a decentralized method of storing and sharing data through computers. Search engines like DuckDuckGo position themselves as untraceable, while virtual private networks (VPNs) encrypt internet traffic to provide users with anonymity and data security. Tor, a software that reroutes and encrypts internet traffic through several to protect user identities, went public in 2002. A follow-up app, Signal is internationally believed to be a viable encrypted and private messaging platform.

Together, these components constitute what users are told is the Dark Web or darknet, an obscured part of the internet that is perceived as a means to evade government surveillance and control. But many of them have their roots in the same surveillance world that their marketers claim to be opposed to. Meanwhile, DuckDuckGo's privacy has been questioned, VPNs can be compromised, and flaws in Tor's code are found regularly. Early U.S. government involvement and funding in both Tor and Signal suggest they are less secure than promoted. Tor was originally developed by the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory in the mid-1990s before it went public, while Signal was partly funded by the government-sponsored Open Technology Fund (OTF), which has ties to the U.S. intelligence community.

The appointment of Katherine Maher to the chairman of Signal's board in 2023, who previously worked for the National Democratic Institute and Foreign Affairs Policy Board, has also raised questions about the app's security. Other anti-surveillance projects developed partly by the OTF, including Open Whisper Systems, CryptoCat, LEAP, and GlobaLeaks, have also had their authenticity questioned.

Dark Web-affiliated systems are also used by states. Russian authorities began cracking down on VPN services, Tor, and other services just before the war in Ukraine, but a year later, they cautiously permitted the expansion of these closely monitored channels to circumvent sanctions. The Iranian government also has a long history of using the dark web to more effectively evade U.S. oversight, while also striving to prevent its citizens from using it to undermine state authority. Even the CIA has developed its own Tor website for communication.

To avoid the dilemma of choosing between a government-monitored internet in collaboration with Big Tech and a lawless Dark Web of dubious anonymity, a middle ground termed Web 3.0 has emerged. Characterized by buzzwords like decentralization and blockchain technology, its proponents seek a more community-driven and peer-to-peer internet landscape with less surveillance and control by the current arbiters of the internet.

However, without true anonymity, these transparency efforts will make surveillance easier. Governments not only develop national and international communication systems but also support private initiatives and those developed by Academia to maintain control over all potential communications systems, including Web 3.0. If certain systems emerge that threaten government surveillance measures, they are either shut down, like the Silk Road, or compromised by various methods including operatives in both U.S. and foreign companies. Instead, Web 3.0 may be more useful in preserving the more open and connected aspect of the internet, though it will still be widely monitored.

Computer hardware and operating systems enable these apps to function inside devices that permit an overlay of surveillance on user activity, no matter the alleged privacy capabilities promised to users. The U.S., Australia, and other countries' efforts to ban Chinese-made Huawei devices highlight the ease of data collection and surveillance through such technologies, revealing similar capabilities in U.S.-made devices, despite the alleged security provided by privacy

apps and other measures. The escalating rivalry between the U.S. and China in developing massive new undersea internet cables shows the intensifying efforts of rival blocs to secure their own communications and surveil others.

Without the ability to create an alternative system not dominated by governments and Big Tech, stronger public oversight over their surveillance and data collection methods is essential for personal privacy. The 34 Senators who voted against FISA's reauthorization in April demonstrated bipartisan support exists for reducing the government's surveillance and data collection powers, while 15 U.S. states have so far adopted stronger data privacy laws for consumers in recent years.

Creating a clear and enforceable punishment system for both government agencies and private companies for data and surveillance abuse will be essential for any attempt to establish greater privacy safeguards. Increasing public awareness of the overt surveillance capabilities of devices and apps, even amidst the massive growth of the privacy protection industry, is a quick way to advance this cause.

By John P. Ruehl

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Credit Line: This article was produced by Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

PVV Blog 8 ~ The Party For Freedom Really In Power Now: A Black Day

05-19-2024 ~ On May 16, 2024, four political parties in the Netherlands reached an agreement to form a new government. The largest of these four parties is the Party for Freedom, a populist party that has now, for the first time, landed at the center of power in the Netherlands.

In my opinion, this has pushed Dutch democracy to its absolute limits.

For me, May 16, 2024, is a black day.

The new coalition's government program contravenes Article 1 of the Constitution, which stipulates that every citizen in the country must be treated equally under equal circumstances. There is a significant devaluation of the rights of asylum seekers and status holders. In this blog, I will revisit the roots of the Party for Freedom and examine how it has grown into a tree of substantial proportions and what these developments mean for the future of our country.

The Cradle of the Party for Freedom
In his 2010 book De schijn-elite van de valse munters, founding party member and current parliament speaker Martin Bosma describes his own development within the party and that of the Party for Freedom itself. Party leader Geert Wilders is, of course, also mentioned in a history that Bosma characterizes as a mission requiring struggle and commitment: "We must function like a kind of semi-underground resistance organization." And about Geert Wilders: "He will never see his house again" (after the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, after which Wilders has been under permanent protection to this day).

Bosma recounts setbacks: "Silently, we look out the window. We still have a long way to go" after a disappointing campaign evening in the Dutch city of Den Bosch.

There is tension: “All your blood, sweat, and tears have been shed in the weeks and months before; now it is a matter of waiting”, on the evening of the November 22, 2010,
parliamentary elections.

There are triumphs: “The looks on the faces of people from the other political parties speak volumes: we are the party crashers, the unwanted intruders. What are we here for?” during the election victory on the same date.

There is a spirit of sacrifice: “I will never forget how Geert says: ‘This is exactly why we are here. Even if we keep one seat in parliament, this is our task’”, during the commotion surrounding the film Fitna, made by Wilders, in which he heavily criticizes Islam and the Quran.

There is *relief*: “These moments make up for a lot. The Netherlands is beginning to understand our message better and better”, after reactions from people in the Dutch municipalities of Volendam and Drachten who voted for the Party for Freedom.

There is a *corporate spirit*: “The Party for Freedom has grown into a gathering of cheerful patriots. People who oppose ‘those who call evil good and good evil, who turn darkness into light and light into darkness, who turn bitter into sweet and sweet into bitter.’”

And a sense of *history*: “A hundred years from now, people will remember Geert Wilders as someone who had the moral clarity to tell the truth that needed to be told.”

The Party for Freedom in Power
The semi-underground resistance organization of people who have shed blood, sweat, and tears, the party crashers and unwanted intruders, the cheerful patriots who know what is good and evil, what is sweet and bitter—these people are now at the center of power. After nearly twenty years of opposition, of agitating, maneuvering, stirring, and insulting, the Party for Freedom has managed to become the largest party in the country and is now steering the state.

Scenario
I think the following scenario will unfold. The coalition has plans to reduce migration that cannot be justified legally or positionally and will be challenged

and rejected by the Dutch courts or by the European Union in Brussels. The coalition parties are well aware of this, but they still put forward these proposals. They do so for two reasons, I believe. Firstly, they anticipate that Dutch judges and Brussels will torpedo the plans. Then the parties can say they did everything to honor their voters' wishes and point fingers at the judges and Brussels: "It wasn't our fault." Meanwhile, they will try to implement the unjust migration policy as much as possible. Time is on their side. They will apply the same tactic to dossiers on nature and agriculture, the nitrogen policy: "It wasn't our fault." They will say: "It's the judges' and Brussels' fault that it didn't work."

European Context

Then there is another development that will stimulate the realization of the coalition program, which is the rise of populist parties in the European arena. In the upcoming

European elections in June, it is expected that these parties will make significant gains. They will become more powerful and closer to the center of European power. They will use similar tactics at the national level: they will demand things that are legally untenable while trying to implement their populist policies on the ground as much as possible, stalling the legal scrutiny. Time is on their side. Polls indicate gains for the Rassemblement National in France and the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany.

A Savior in the Coalition?

The Party for Freedom has succeeded in reaching the center of power, and I deeply regret that. The only party in the new coalition and the person who can influence a positive

outcome is party leader Pieter Omtzigt and his party Nieuw Sociaal Contract. It would not surprise me if his sole motivation for joining this unfortunate coalition is inspired by his desire to defend, maintain, and strengthen the rule of law. Will he succeed in implementing this defense against Wilders and ensuring that democracy becomes the democracy it should be? Time will tell, but until then, we must watch as the "cheerful patriots" devour and dismantle democracy.