Review Forum

Political humor and reverse dominance hierarchies


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After reading this concise, thoughtful, and well-written volume, many scholars will surely wish they had come up with the idea for this book. Readers of Politics and the Life Sciences and other evolutionarily oriented publications will find the fundamental premises of Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja’s book, Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership, familiar. The manner in which van Vugt and Ahuja outline information and the insights they offer make this a pleasure to consume. Accessible to both academic and lay audiences, this book has the potential to revolutionize the moribund and disparate field of leadership studies by providing a coherent theory of leadership based upon evolutionary theory.

Organized into seven chapters, two appendices and a useful glossary, the book provides the average reader with an introduction to how evolutionary theory informs the study of leadership, as well as its necessary yet overshadowed corollary—followership. The first chapter, “The nature of leadership,” provides a comprehensive, but not overwhelming, review of ten major theories of leadership. These theories range from the classic “Great Man” theory, which holds that leaders are born to lead, to more recent theories, such as transactional versus transformational leadership, that hold sway in the public administration literature. All the while, van Vugt and Ahuja develop their “Evolutionary Leadership Theory,” connecting these diverse and disparate theories into a comprehensive framework.

The next three chapters explore the natural history of leaders and followers. Chapter 2 uses insights from game theory to elucidate the genetic underpinnings of behavioral and personality traits that predisposes individuals to lead or follow. Here, the authors establish the premises from which the rest of the book proceeds—humans are a social species adapted to group living and evolution favors those groups with both followers and leaders over unorganized groups. Chapter 3 explores followership in greater depth, including the benefits of being a follower in a cohesive group. It also posits specific types of followers, including “first followers” who are crucial for turning individuals into leaders. “Critical followers” are those prepared to challenge incompetent or dangerous leaders, sometimes at great risk to their own safety. Chapter 4 posits the rationale for why humans value egalitarian relations, even while striving for positions of power. Notable in this chapter are the “Strategies to Overcome the Powerful.” Here, five escalating strategies provide insights into curbing the power of leaders through gossip, public meetings, satire, disobedience, and, most drastically, assassination.

In the next two chapters, the authors explore how leadership goes wrong. Chapter 5, on corruption, examines the dark side of power and strategies leaders use to maintain and increase power. Here the authors identify seven strategies to enhance power and the “Dark Triad” of personality traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The penultimate chapter explores what the authors label the “mismatch hypothesis.” This premise argues that followers with hard-wired preferences for leaders possessing physical traits indicating dominance such as age, gender, height, strong facial characteristics, and vocal masculinity once served humanity well in the context of “small, ancestral, egalitarian hunter gatherer groups” (p. 149). But these characteristics, which might have worked well in protecting followers from aggressors and predators on