

Political peacocks

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The puzzle

Suddenly, in the spring of 1985 in New York, hundreds of Columbia University students took over the campus administration building and demanded that the university sell off all of its stocks in companies that do business in South Africa. As a psychology undergraduate at Columbia, I was puzzled by the spontaneity, ardour, and near-unanimity of the student demands for divestment. Why would mostly white, mostly middle-class North Americans miss classes, risk jail, and occupy a drab office building for two weeks, in support of political freedom for poor blacks living in a country six thousand miles away?

The campus conservative newspaper ran a cartoon depicting the protest as an annual springtime mating ritual, with Dionysian revels punctuated by political sloganeering about this year's arbitrary cause. At the time, I thought the cartoon tasteless and patronizing. Now, I wonder if it contained a grain of truth. Although the protests achieved their political aims only inefficiently and indirectly, they did function very effectively to bring together young men and women who claimed to share similar political ideologies. Everyone I knew was dating someone they'd met at the sit-in. In many cases, the ideological commitment was paper-thin, and the protest ended just in time to study for semester exams. Yet the sexual relationships facilitated by the protest sometimes lasted for years.

The hypothesis that loud public advertisements of one's political ideology function as some sort of courtship display designed to attract sexual mates, analogous to the peacock's tail or the nightingale's song, seems dangerous. It risks trivializing all of political discourse, just as the conservative cartoon lampooned the Columbia anti-apartheid protests. The best way to avoid this pitfall is not to ignore the sexual undertones to human political behavior, but to analyze them seriously and respectfully using the strongest and most relevant theory we have from evolutionary biology: Darwin's theory of sexual selection through mate choice.

The history

Most people think of Darwinian evolution as a blind, haphazard, unguided process in which physical environments impose capricious selection pressures on species, which must adapt or die. True, for natural selection itself. But Darwin himself seems to have become rather bored with natural selection by the inanimate environment after he published *The Origin of Species* in 1859. He turned to much more interesting question of how animal and human minds can shape evolution. In his 1862 book *On the various contrivances by which British and foreign orchids are fertilized by insects* he outlined how the perceptual and behavioral capacities of pollinators shape the evolution of flower color and form. In his massive two-volume work of 1868, *The variation of animals and plants under domestication*, he detailed how human needs and tastes have shaped the

evolution of useful and ornamental features in domesticates. Further works on animal emotions in 1872 and the behavior of climbing plants in 1875 continued the trend towards an evolutionary psychology. Most provocatively, Darwin combined the frisson of sex with the spookiness of mind and the enigma of human evolution in his two-volume masterpiece of 1871, *The descent of man, and Selection in relation to sex*.

Darwin observed that many animals, especially females, are rather picky about their sexual partners. But why would it ever pay to reject a suitor? Being choosy requires time, energy, and intelligence – costs that can impair survival. The basic rationale for mate choice is that random mating is stupid mating. It pays to be choosy because in a sexually reproducing species, the genetic quality of your mate will determine half the genetic quality of your offspring. Ugly, unhealthy mates usually lead to ugly, unhealthy offspring.

By forming a joint genetic venture with an attractive, high-quality mate, one's genes are much more likely to be passed on. Mate choice is simply the best eugenics and genetic screening that female animals are capable of carrying out under field conditions, with no equipment other than their senses and their brains.

Often, sexual selection through mate choice can lead to spectacular results: the bowerbird's elaborate nest, the riflebird's riveting dance, the nightingale's haunting song, and the peacock's iridescent tail, for example. Such features are complex adaptations that evolved through mate choice, to function both as advertisements of the male's health and as aesthetic displays that excite female senses. One can recognize these courtship displays by certain biological criteria: they are expensive to produce and hard to maintain, they have survival costs but reproductive benefits, they are loud, bright, rhythmic, complex, and creative to stimulate the senses, they occur more often after reproductive maturity, more often during the breeding season, more often in males than in females, and more often when potential mates are present than absent. Also, they tend to evolve according to unpredictable fashion cycles that change the detailed structure and content of the displays while maintaining their complexity, extremity, and cost.

By these criteria, most human behaviors that we call cultural, ideological, and political would count as courtship displays.

Victorian skeptics objected to Darwin's theory of sexual selection by pointing out that in contemporary European society, women tended to display more physical ornamentation than men, contrary to the men-display-more hypothesis. This is true only if courtship display is artificially restricted to physical artefacts worn on the body. Whereas Victorian women ornamented themselves with mere jewelry and clothing, men ornamented themselves with the books they wrote, pictures they painted, symphonies they composed, country estates they bought, honors they won, and vast political and economic empires they built.

Although Darwin presented overwhelming evidence for his ingenious sexual selection theory, it fell into disrepute for over a century. Even Alfred Russell Wallace, the co-discoverer of natural selection, preferred to view male ornaments as outlets for a surplus of male energy, rather than as adaptations evolved through female choice. Even now, we hear echoes of Wallace's fallacious surplus-of-energy argument in most

psychological and anthropological theories about the “self-expressive” functions of human art, music, language, and culture.

The Modern Synthesis of Mendelian genetics and Darwinism in the 1930s continued to reject female choice, assuming that sexual ornaments simply intimidate other males or keep animals from mating with the wrong species. Only in the 1980s, with a confluence of support from mathematical models, computer simulations, and experiments in animal and human mate choice, has Darwin’s sexual selection theory been re-established as a major part of evolutionary biology. Unfortunately, almost everything written about the evolutionary origins of the human mind, language, culture, ideology, and politics, has ignored the power of sexual selection through mate choice as a force that creates exactly these sorts of elaborate display behaviors.

The hypothesis

Humans are ideological animals. We show strong motivations and incredible capacities to learn, create, recombine, and disseminate ideas. Despite the evidence that these idea-processing systems are complex biological adaptations that must have evolved through Darwinian selection, even the most ardent modern Darwinians such as Stephen Jay Gould, Richards Dawkins, and Dan Dennett tend to treat culture as an evolutionary arena separate from biology.

One reason for this failure of nerve is that it is so difficult to think of any form of natural selection that would favor such extreme, costly, and obsessive ideological behavior. Until the last 40,000 years of human evolution, the pace of technological and social change was so slow that it’s hard to believe there was much of a survival payoff to becoming such an ideological animal.

My hypothesis, developed in a long Ph.D. dissertation, several recent papers, and a forthcoming book [*The Mating Mind*], is that the payoffs to ideological behavior were largely reproductive. The heritable mental capacities that underpin human language, culture, music, art, and myth-making evolved through sexual selection operating on both men and women, through mutual mate choice. Whatever technological benefits those capacities happen to have produced in recent centuries are unanticipated side-effects of adaptations originally designed for courtship.

Language, of course, is the key to ideological display. Whereas songbirds can only toy with protean combinations of pitch, rhythm, and timbre, language gives humans the closest thing to telepathy in nature: the ability to transmit complex ideas from one head to another, through the tricks of syntax and semantics. Language opens a window into other minds, expanding the arena of courtship display from the physical to the conceptual.

This has enormous implications for the way that sexual selection worked during the last few hundred thousand years of human evolution. As human courtship relied more heavily on language, mate choice focused more on the ideas that language expresses. The selection pressures that shaped the evolution of the human mind came increasingly not from the environment testing whether one’s hunting skills were sufficient for survival, but from other minds testing whether one’s ideas were interesting enough to provoke some sexual attraction.

Every ancestor of every human living today was successful in attracting someone to mate with them. Conversely, the millions of hominids and early humans who were too dull and uninspiring to become our ancestors carried genes for brains that were not as ideologically expressive as ours.

A wonderful effect of this runaway sexual selection was that brain size in our lineage has tripled over the last two million years, giving us biologically unprecedented capacities for creative thought, astonishing expressiveness, and intricate culture. A more problematic effect is that our ideological capacities were under selection to be novel, interesting, and entertaining to other idea-infested minds, not to accurately represent the external world or their own transient and tangential place in it. This general argument applies to many domains of human behaviour and culture, but for the remainder of the paper, I will focus on political ideology.

The predictions and implications

The vast majority of people in modern societies have almost no political power, yet have strong political convictions that they broadcast insistently, frequently, and loudly when social conditions are right. This behavior is puzzling to economists, who see clear time and energy costs to ideological behavior, but little political benefit to the individual. My point is that the individual benefits of expressing political ideology are usually not political at all, but social and sexual. As such, political ideology is under strong social and sexual constraints that make little sense to political theorists and policy experts.

This simple idea may solve a number of old puzzles in political psychology. Why do hundreds of questionnaires show that men more conservative, more authoritarian, more rights-oriented, and less empathy-oriented than women? Why do people become more conservative as they move from young adulthood to middle age? Why do more men than women run for political office? Why are most ideological revolutions initiated by young single men?

None of these phenomena make sense if political ideology is a rational reflection of political self-interest. In political, economic, and psychological terms, everyone has equally strong self-interests, so everyone should produce equal amounts of ideological behavior, if that behavior functions to advance political self-interest. However, we know from sexual selection theory that not everyone has equally strong reproductive interests.

Males have much more to gain from each act of intercourse than females, because, by definition, they invest less in each gamete. Young males should be especially risk-seeking in their reproductive behavior, because they have the most to win and the least to lose from risky courtship behavior (such as becoming a political revolutionary). These predictions are obvious to any sexual selection theorist. Less obvious are the ways in which political ideology is used to advertise different aspects of one's personality across the lifespan.

In unpublished studies I ran at Stanford University with Felicia Pratto, we found that university students tend to treat each others' political orientations as proxies for personality traits. Conservatism is simply read off as indicating an ambitious, self-interested personality who will excel at protecting and provisioning his or her mate.

Liberalism is read as indicating a caring, empathetic personality who will excel at child care and relationship-building.

Given the well-documented, cross-culturally universal sex differences in human mate choice criteria, with men favoring younger, fertile women, and women favoring older, higher-status, richer men, the expression of more liberal ideologies by women and more conservative ideologies by men is not surprising. Men use political conservatism to (unconsciously) advertise their likely social and economic dominance; women use political liberalism to advertise their nurturing abilities. The shift from liberal youth to conservative middle age reflects a mating-relevant increase in social dominance and earnings power, not just a rational shift in one's self-interest.

More subtly, because mating is a social game in which the attractiveness of a behavior depends on how many other people are already producing that behavior, political ideology evolves under the unstable dynamics of game theory, not as a process of simple optimization given a set of self-interests.

This explains why an entire student body at an American university can suddenly act as if they care deeply about the political fate of a country that they virtually ignored the year before. The courtship arena simply shifted, capriciously, from one political issue to another, but once a sufficient number of students decided that attitudes towards apartheid were the acid test for whether one's heart was in the right place, it became impossible for anyone else to be apathetic about apartheid. This is called frequency-dependent selection in biology, and it is a hallmark of sexual selection processes.

What can policy analysts do, if most people treat political ideas as courtship displays that reveal the proponent's personality traits, rather than as rational suggestions for improving the world?

The pragmatic, not to say cynical, solution is to work with the evolved grain of the human mind by recognizing that people respond to policy ideas first as big-brained, idea-infested, hypersexual primates, and only secondly as concerned citizens in a modern polity. This view will not surprise political pollsters, spin doctors, and speech writers, who make their daily living by exploiting our lust for ideology, but it may surprise social scientists who take a more rationalistic view of human nature.

Fortunately, sexual selection was not the only force to shape our minds. Other forms of social selection such as kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and even group selection seem to have favoured some instincts for political rationality and consensual egalitarianism. Without the sexual selection, we would never have become such colourful ideological animals. But without the other forms of social selection, we would have little hope of bringing our sexily protean ideologies into congruence with reality.