

THE COLLEGE --- FIX

Blame evolution for socialism's enduring, baffling appeal, social scientists argue

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Why, despite the evidence that it leads to economic disaster, does socialism continue to remain a morally compelling ideal to so many around the world?

According to social scientists at a recent Cato Institute forum, evolutionary psychology may be able to explain why socialism keeps cropping up throughout human history.

Speakers including New York University's Jonathan Haidt, co-founder of Heterodox Academy and co-author of "The Coddling of the American Mind," discussed whether socialist tendencies are inherent to the human brain's design and can be unlearned and replaced by an understanding of the free market.

Liberals tend to believe humans are "natural socialists who enjoy sharing and are just corrupted by a culture of private property and capitalism," while conservatives believe "we need culture to rein in" base human motives, said Leda Cosmides, co-founder of the University of California-Santa Barbara's Center for Evolutionary Psychology.

But whether humans are "good or bad" misses the point, she said: "We're collections of adaptations that execute our functions."

The human brain can be thought of as an iPhone, according to Cosmides' co-founder at the UCSB center, John Tooby: It contains hundreds of "apps," or neural programs, that have evolved to solve adaptive problems.

It was students that convinced Tooby "the smartphone was actually a much better model" for the human mind than an earlier model, the Swiss army knife, he said.

So what's going on when people ignore the mountains of empirical evidence against socialism? According to Tooby, our "apps" have just been arranged in a certain way.

“The program structure in certain of our evolved social and nonsocial instincts can be activated in certain configurations that make socialism seem appealing and freedom sinister,” he said.

Our evolved psychology doesn’t just doom us to socialist states, Tooby continued: “The point is that these evolved programs could be woven together in our minds to undermine or reinforce political projects, ideologies, economic regimes.”

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According to New York University’s Haidt, whose research focus is the psychology of morality, “we all have the same apps. But they either are on different settings or some are on the home screen and you have to swipe before you find them.”

While humanity has an “enormous evolutionary heritage for tribalism” and also “evolved to trade,” he said, “what we don’t have is any evolutionary heritage that allows us or makes it easy for us to understand economics or evolution.”

Haidt said different political ideologies have formed collective narratives based on certain apps. While human communities share some foundational conceptions of morality – for example, fairness is better than cheating – this “app” can mean different things to different people.

Fairness to left-leaning people means that “if the 1 percent own 43 percent, that is ipso facto unfair,” Haidt said, while empirical research shows that conservatives see fairness in terms of “proportionality” – rewarding success and value creation and punishing failure.

The solution to dealing with dueling collective narratives – on care, fairness and liberty – may be recognizing that both contain truth and the same “apps” at the bottom, according to Haidt.

A practical way forward, Haidt said, could be reducing the role of money in politics, to reduce liberals’ negative conceptions of the free market. He also recommended that free-market fans embrace “subsidiarity” and dealing with issues at the lowest level, rather than turning to the federal government.

Viewpoint diversity should be increased in the universities so that students are not taught merely a pro-socialist approach – and kids in schools should learn basic economics, Haidt said.

“I would reduce the amount of math we make kids learn—even scientists don’t generally need that much math,” he said.

“What we need is a populace that is literate in analytical thinking. A year of statistics and economics would do wonders.”