

The Washington Times

Evolutionary anomalies in our midst

Some have developed the means to achieve; others work at the IRS

By: Richard Rahn, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute

June 25, 2013

It is odd to be on a small volcanic island on the equator in the Pacific Ocean, 600 miles west of Ecuador, for a meeting of economists and a few other academics and think-tank types. One of the lesser purposes of the meeting is to discuss what we can learn from natural selection and animal behavior that might have relevance for the world economy and modern societies. And no, this is not a government boondoggle. We are a bunch of limited-government, free-market types, here on our own tab — not burdening any taxpayer with our eccentricities.

When Charles Darwin first landed here back in 1835, he was struck by the many indigenous animal and plant species, and specialization of the animals in order to best prosper. The Galapagos is a cluster of 18 isolated islands, plus an assortment of islets and rocks, with different microclimates caused by elevation and mountains' blocking effect of the trade winds. The variations in rainfall, from island to island and within an island, determine what plants grow where, which, in turn, determine which animals use them for food and shelter. Even the tortoises vary from one island to another, depending on the food source.

The animals have had hundreds, if not thousands, of generations to evolve and exploit the food and terrain available. Humans, more specifically Americans, have had only three generations to adapt to the Internal Revenue Service.

Even though many animals cooperate in order to help protect themselves, or hunt better and multiply — everything from schools of fish to wolf packs — the human animal is unique in its ability to communicate and build elaborate cooperative structures. Many of the animals in the Galapagos were gentle and passive because of the lack of land predators. Once humans arrived with dogs, cats and other foreign predators, many of the native species were greatly reduced in number or even made extinct.

Humans, on the other hand, have shown their ability to adapt to almost any environment and build elaborate shelters to protect themselves from weather and predators. Humans are able to do this, in part, because of an incredible range of skills and abilities within individuals that, when joined in cooperative relationships, can accomplish almost anything.

A human, having to rely solely on his own abilities and knowledge for survival without the aid of any other individual, would have a relatively short life expectancy (as is true with most animals). However, humans voluntarily and privately coming together, can create — with a huge array of

talents and knowledge — great musical works, architectural masterpieces, amazing aircraft, less-expensive and better food, cures for major diseases and smartphones.

Government, by contrast, produces almost no advances other than funding research and development for some medical technology or new military weapon. Government is forced collectivization, by necessity, in order to protect people and property, including the common defense, and to ensure liberty. Even though the Founding Fathers created the U.S. political and government system several decades before Darwin wrote his book on evolution, they well understood that for humans to prosper, the government should have limited functions and that an institutional structure needed to be established to reward the most energetic and creative. This is why the Constitution provides for a patent system to protect intellectual property and encourage innovation.

Critics of American capitalism often argue incorrectly that it is based on the Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest; hence, those less able to compete will be thrown onto the ash heap. Those who correctly read American history will know that nothing could be further from the truth because America's Founders well understood the importance of voluntary association — whether it be a church, civic group or aid society — in taking care of the less fortunate and those less able to compete. The experience of relying less on voluntary associations and more on government to provide the safety net has, as most people understand, not worked out terribly well.

Despite the growth of government, most Americans still admire excellence. Through genetic luck and hard work, sports figures who do their jobs better than their competitors are highly regarded and receive the financial rewards. Great musicians are likewise applauded. Small-business people and entrepreneurs who risk everything to provide us with the goods and services that make our lives better and more enjoyable are held in high regard. Scientists and medical professionals who improve our health are revered. Of course, those in the military who risk their lives to keep the rest of us safe are honored.

Like the fleas, bugs and ticks that annoy and endanger the animals of the Galapagos, humans also are infected with parasites such as trial lawyers who bring phony class-action lawsuits, government regulators and workers who fail to produce more benefits than costs, and assorted thieves and thugs. Of course, the ultimate parasites — those at the IRS, who by hiding behind civil service protections and the Fifth Amendment — unnecessarily bully the hardworking and creative. They lack the talent and ambition to better the lives of their fellow human beings.

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and chairman of the Institute for Global Economic Growth.