Review

Peter Turchin, *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth* (Chaplin, CT: Beresta Books, 2015), 274 pp. ISBN: 978-0-99613-953-3. \$18.95 pbk, \$9.95 ePub; Kindle.

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Peter Turchin's new volume entitled *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth* is an important one in the field of biocultural evolution. For someone familiar with his previous works on ecology, population dynamics, and historical cycles, the present book is an easy read. Although it is permeated by intellectual perspicacity and erudition, it is free of the mathematical equations and models that usually – and for good reasons – constitute an integral part of Turchin's works, but make them a difficult read. *Ultrasociety* is written with *élan* and elegance, and the argument presented by the author is new and thought-provoking. Contrary to other scholars in the field, Turchin accentuates war as the fundamental evolutionary driver. This may sound excessively hideous and cynical to readers, but Turchin sophisticatedly and persuasively develops his argument throughout the book. He acknowledges the destructive nature of war, but he also emphasizes how it may lead to a remarkable end. In fact, *Ultrasociety* is driven by an optimistic tone. Turchin advocates that it is reasonable to believe that war eventually will make itself superfluous and will contribute to create the basis for a peaceful world.

Ultrasociety consists of ten chapters, acknowledgements, notes, and a bibliography. An index of topics and names, both absent, would have been useful. Indeed, the book is in all respects devoid of bibliophile extravaganza.

Chapter 1 sets the stage. Choosing as point of departure the ritual centre of the tell of Göbleki Tepe in present day Turkey, dating 12,000 years back in time to the Neolithic period, Turchin advances his thesis as follows: bringing people together leads to cooperation and community. Göbekli Tepe, together with the various henges of early Stone Age, is truly impressive in this regard. It took massive physical work to erect the characteristic pillars of the archaeological site, and that work called for substantial, carefully planned collaboration. Yet, the number of people involved was

astonishingly low compared to present-day cooperation. At the other end of the time span, Turchin recalls the International Space Station orbiting planet Earth, which marks collaboration at a truly global scale. Both examples vividly demonstrate how culture and evolution are driven by teamwork.

Since ca. 200,000 years ago, hominin cooperation has expanded from a handful of people among foraging bands, to large scale societies during the past two centuries, up to the contemporary networks of millions of interacting individuals. The development is astounding and calls for an explanation. Turchin raises the following quintessentially Durkheimian questions, although Émile Durkheim is never cited: why do empires decline and fall? How did they become possible? What are the social forces that endow them with cohesion?

One last point has an important bearing on the subsequent argument and, as one senses through the book, is of personal significance to Turchin. In the wake of Cristopher Boehm (2001), he notes how early foragers took leave with the hierarchical order of chimpanzee and gorilla communities only to see the alpha males reappear in the guise of divine kings and chieftains approximately 10,000 years ago: “They oppressed us, enslaved us, and sacrificed us on the altars of bloodthirsty gods” (p. 22).

With the appearance of Axial Age religions, however, the first blow was directed against this repressive order. Indeed, these new and complex ideologies were focused on the re-discussion and renegotiation of the dominant hierarchy. Yet, not until the Enlightenment was the societal decline with regard to inequality decisively reversed. Since then human beings have been progressing towards more equal societies with a greater egalitarian balance between different population segments. As Turchin unfolds it in the concluding chapter (10), we are confronted with two Z-movements: from increasing egalitarianism among foragers (the upper Z-stroke) to enhanced inequality (the declining vertical stroke) replaced from Enlightenment by a return movement towards a growing extent of equality approaching that of early foragers. Within this overall development, many small “z”s are nevertheless possible (e.g. the sudden reappearance of increased equality and criticism of inequity during the aforementioned Axial Age period).

Chapter 2 takes up the topic of “Destructive Creation”. It poses the question of how cultural evolution led to large, peaceful, and wealthy ultrasocieties, that is, societies in which cooperation is widespread in extended non-kin groups. Following in the footsteps of Lawrence Keeley (1996), Turchin repudiates the idea of the peaceful and noble savage. The evidence for general hominin violence is overwhelming. So how did large scale

societies come about, and how could evolution drive us to a point largely against our egoistic and latent violent nature? The answer is as simple as it is complex: “people had to invent arrangements that would allow them to cooperate with strangers. The better they got at cooperation, the better their chances of staying in the game” (p. 40). But how does war enter this picture? Very straightforwardly: greater cooperation is possible when peaceful and stable societies, capable of suppressing inherent violent tendencies, push those tendencies towards and beyond their borders. Thereby, these societies can afford themselves to pay less attention to intra-violence and focus on potential inter-violence.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the “Cooperator’s Dilemma” and the problem of altruism among genetically unrelated people. Criticism is directed against both Richard Dawkins’ ideas and supporters of by-product theories. The critique against by-product theorists may be overstated, because Turchin radicalizes an infelicitous dichotomy of by-product vs. adaptation, but do we really need to understand the issue in digital, mutually exclusive terms? Is it really impossible that something originally evolved as a by-product eventually became adaptive? (See, for instance, de Waal *et al.* 2014).

Generally, the chapters have catchy titles like chapter 4 entitled “Cooperate to Compete”. Here Turchin impressively succeeds in explaining the gist of Price equation to non-specialists. In a nutshell, this equation describes how the frequency of genes or specific traits in a population changes through time. Afterwards, and on this basis, Turchin demonstrates how competition may lead to enhanced cooperation.

Chapter 5 “God Made Men, but Sam Colt Made Them Equal” elaborates on how hominin access to long-distance weaponry like stones and spears contributed to suppress the dominance of alpha males, since anyone – in principle – had the potential to kill an oppressive upstart or rogue. Chapter 6, entitled “The Human Ways of War”, constitutes the core of the book’s argument. In this chapter, Turchin demonstrates how war not only represents destruction but may also offer new technological opportunities. By means of projectile weapons hominin ancestors were capable of defending themselves from conspecifics and other Pleistocene mammalian competitors.

Chapter 7 focuses on the emergence of agriculture and the reappearance of the alpha male. Contrary to Kent Flannery’s and Joyce Marcus’ (2012) argument that monopolizing ritual authority gave rise to a socially ruling segment with a distinct leader, Turchin presents an alternative thesis elaborated in chapter 8: “The Iron Law of Oligarchy”. Using Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser as an example, Turchin surmises that war enabled larger

societies to outdo smaller ones. The negative side effect of this was the re-emergence of despotism, since war calls for leadership – this chapter also includes a significant critique of Steven Pinker’s influential book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011).

The last two chapters focus on the reverse movement: that is, return of increasing equality subsequent to the Axial Age turn (chapter 9) and the overall theoretical discussion of this transition towards equality (chapter 10: “Zigzags of Human Evolution”).

This book is highly commendable, but that does not exclude various points of criticism. Chapter 9 on the Axial Age and the ongoing discussion of the issue reveal an author without deep familiarity with the history of scholarship on the topic as well as with the intricate historical and historiographical problems involved in it. For instance, Jaspers’ coinage of the Axial Age does not date to his 1949 book, but to a booklet from 1946 (Benda *et al.* 1946; Jaspers 1947). Nor did Jaspers invent the concept, which has an important prehistory in German intellectual life. Presumably it dates back to Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* from 1837. Moreover, hardly anybody with knowledge of Zoroastrianism would dare to date the available sources to the Axial Age. Christianity was not an independent religion with respect to Judaism until the fourth century CE at the earliest. Finally, I am quite sure that sociologist Robert N. Bellah (1927–2013) would have preferred the designation “scholar of religion” rather than “religious scholar” (p. 179).

Another conspicuous issue is the lack of references to Herbert Spencer and his ideas. To the best of my knowledge, Turchin’s argument is basically Spencerian in that it appears to be grounded on the idea of “survival of the fittest”. A preliminary discussion of the historical roots, influences, confusion, and misunderstandings generated by Spencerian evolutionism would have been useful from both a heuristic and a historiographical perspective.

Parallel to the critique I have raised against Joseph Henrich’s *The Secret of Our Success* in another book review for the *Journal of Cognitive History*, there is in Turchin a remarkable lack of discussion of the negative primary feelings in conjunction with the emphasis he places on war as a cultural driver. Is this really without relevance? Should it not be taken into consideration, when one recognizes how we share this feature with our nearest phylogenetic relatives among the apes, and how deeply ingrained it is in our biology?

Yet, I do not want to end this review on a negative tone, since basically I am full of praise for Turchin’s book. It is highly readable: *Tolle lege!*

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