

The Cult of Mer: or Why There is a Collective In Your Consciousness

Edward W. Constant II
Carnegie-Mellon University

Let me begin with a postulate that some may find argumentative, more likely will find merely banal: all accounts of behavior in our species, among whom I will graciously count businessmen, fall into one of two sets. One set is grounded in the singular supposition that all hominid behavior, even aggregate behavior, is fully explicable in terms of "thinly described" atomistic individuals pursuing venally selfish goals, or "self interests," or even "rational self-interests." This supposition has until very recently harmonized nicely with ideas in evolutionary biology and in sociobiology which see our species' behavior, as well as that of all other sexually reproducing species, as driven by "selfish genes" seeking only to maximize their inclusive fitness -- their representation in the next generation [4]. In this paradigm, altruism, quasi-altruism, or even cooperation in pursuit of collective interests, are at best instrumental: they are extended only to near-kin, or they depend upon an imputed (rational) "calculation" of expected returns or future reciprocity. In classic Darwinian adaptationist terms, it cannot be otherwise: true altruists would soon be genetically swamped in a sea of defectors and opportunistic hypocrites. All behavioral research within this broad paradigm Linnda Caporael, Robyn Dawes, et al., felicitously denominate "egoistic incentive" analyses [8].

The alternative set of explanations for hominid behavior sees the paradox of altruism -- the widespread presence of altruistic, quasi-altruistic, and cooperative behaviors -- as a fatal anomaly for the egoistic incentive paradigm. These alternative accounts require recourse to collective consciousness, and therefore to culture and its mechanisms of production, transmission, and reproduction. In this paradigm, reductionist egoistic incentive models are judged inadequate by themselves to save the phenomena.

I don't think it unfair to say that almost all social science (with the exception of some dissident schools in anthropology and sociology), and most history (including business history) since the Second World War have fallen almost exclusively within the egoistic incentive camp. There are some notable exceptions, but not many, and they normally do not articulate an alternative behavioral theory [3, 10, 44, 45, 50]. Even in economic history, the patrimony

of Max Weber goes largely forsaken: "thickly described" cultural actors are replaced by "rational, analytical" managers, by quintessential "problem solvers," by MBA CPUs. While there is occasional, casual invocation of "corporate culture," it most often remains some disembodied zeitgeist that hovers over corporate life like a pregnant miasma, without known cause or demonstrable consequence.

Nevertheless, recent work in a variety of disciplines (social and decision sciences, social and cognitive psychology, law and society, anthropology, and evolutionary biology) raises general doubts about the adequacy of "egoistic incentive" models to account for all hominid behavior. Partly this renewed interest derives from the failure of game theorists to demonstrate the existence of any egoistic incentive based "evolutionarily stable strategy" (ESS) that can account for the emergence or persistence of cooperative behavior in interactions involving more than two players [1, 2, 16]. Some investigators, notably Robert Ellickson in his charming *Order Without Law: How Neighbors Settle Disputes*, still try to ground cooperative behavior in rationalist transaction costs notions that in turn presume egoistic, incentive driven actors [15].

Others, more venturesome, seek some evolutionary rationale for intrinsic cooperative or even altruistic propensities in our species or in its ancestors. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, for example, coming to the problem from their own cognitive psychology/artificial intelligence perspective, reject the whole idea of the human psyche as one big "general purpose" CPU. They argue that human cognitive abilities are more likely to have evolved as a set of "special purpose and domain specific" problem solving capacities or algorithms capable of solving highly specific problems in early hominids' environments. Once such capacities evolved, however, they could have been used for other purposes, even linked to solve more complex, especially social, problems [46].

Tooby and Cosmides conjecture a computational "cognitive theory of social exchange" that constitutes an innate "grammar of social contracts" characteristic of our species, and which admits of "cooperation for mutual benefit." They claim that such a grammar can be specified in enough detail to be simulated (tested, according to their standards) by appropriate programs [12]. Such conjectures, even when backed by plausible simulations, are in principle still open to the exactly same objection lodged against sociobiology's postulation of genetically encoded "traits" to account for human behavioral propensities: namely, exactly how many individuated "traits," so reminiscent of nineteenth century "instincts," are to be allowed?

In all, the most powerful critique of egoistic incentive suppositions is Caporael, Dawes, et al.'s empirical demonstration that altruistic cooperative propensities exist among human subjects over a wide range of experimental conditions. Their results essentially refute the universality of egoistic incentives in motivating behavior: in some social dilemma games or experiments, subjects do cooperate, even when it is not in their self-interest to do so, even when there is no cost to them not to cooperate, and even when they understand their situation exactly. Cooperation among all subjects invariably occurred only in small groups in which discussion was permitted

before individual players made their decisions (but with no post-play knowledge of others' choices). Caporael, et al., infer that in such small group situations, an intrinsic "in-group bias" induces cooperative, even self-sacrificingly altruistic behavior, among members of the group, but not toward outsiders or other groups. Based on this inference from experimental results, the authors speculate, contra the "selfish gene" and rational self-interest theories of human motivation, that "cognitive and affective" mechanisms which produce in-group bias in our species are the result of early hominids' evolutionary ecology that favored (or, more accurately, selected against the obverse of) sociality and interdependence in small groups (of size perhaps 15 to 30).

Logically, none of these arguments refute the central tenet of genetic selfishness, however much they do undermine phenotypic egoistic incentive presuppositions. Genotypic selfishness is consistent with an immensely wide variety of phenotypic behaviors, ranging from pure altruism (in eusocial insects, in cetaceans, and possibly in hominids) to contingent cannibalism toward conspecifics, near kin, progeny, and mates [11, 49]. Neither can any of these arguments demonstrate an in-group bias or altruism in groups much beyond the likely size of extended proto-hominid kin-groups. The barriers of transaction costs, and free-rider and agency problems, that bar large-scale collective cooperation within the egoistic incentive paradigm remain largely unbreached [37], although specific, contingent properties of group structure (resource diversity, social network configurations), under very narrowly defined conditions, may render efficacious collective action at least less unlikely, even given only egoistic incentives [31, 36].

The more plausible path to large scale cooperation and altruism is culture and collective consciousness. Donald Campbell frames the argument with his usual elegance. First, consider the inclusive genetic fitness payoff to all group members for collective social suppression of individual phenotypic selfishness, defection, or cheating: In early hominid ecologies,

... a novel form of collective interest emerges.... Greedy quarreling for maximum share reduces the pool of resources to be shared. In ecologies where cooperation can double or quadruple the per-capita resources available, there is a payoff for effective social control that protects the efficacy of cooperation from individual greed [6, pp. 359-360].

But how to suppress phenotypic selfishness? According to Campbell, the universal solution is collective self-deception: "Thus reifications of collective purpose useful in solving the problem of collective goods, superstitiously embodied in belief about powerful, transcendent gods or in an individual afterlife of rewards and punishments, if recurrently adaptive, might further the selection of biological predispositions to such religious emotions and beliefs" [7, p. 25].

There is, however, no logical requirement that such hominid cultural capabilities be adaptive in the classical neo-Darwinian sense. As Stephen Jay Gould argues, not all characteristics of a species that have present-day utility

are necessarily adaptations; such a characteristic may be instead what Gould terms an "exaptation": "a feature, now useful to an organism, that did not arise as an adaptation for its present role, but was subsequently coopted for its current function" [19, p. 43]. Gould speculates that, "attributes unique to our species, and constituting the essence of what we call human consciousness, are likely to be exaptations ..." [19, p. 61]. Significantly, whether the hominid symbolic capabilities that undergird the social and collective processes discussed below are classical Darwinian adaptations, or are exaptations, has no consequence for the core argument in this paper.

These still acrimonious controversies point directly to that argument: first, complete understanding of hominid behavior requires recourse to collective consciousness and to the social processes of its cultural production and sustenance; second, collective consciousness is a social achievement: it emphatically is not some superorganic entity, some zeitgeist, nor is it some emergent epiphenomenon of material or class relations. In short, it has to be made by historical, cultural actors. Third, such collective consciousness therefore must be produced by specific mechanisms grounded in individual consciousness or cognitive processes and in social behavior. I claim that what will be described presently under the rubrics of processes of alienated collective representation and self-production in collective idiom meet these requirements.

The terminology is borrowed from, and the argument an extension of, the work of P. Steven Sangren on Taiwanese religious cults. Sangren argues that the devotees of cult deities (who very often are historical, or at least mythically historical persona) mask the sociogenesis of their own communal solidarity or consciousness by creating an alienated representation of that solidarity, the deity, and then attributing to its power what is in reality their own social production. This process neatly locates the power of the community outside itself, ostensibly beyond egoistic tampering, appropriation, or corruption. Individual devotees ritually produce themselves as devotees, (that is, as members of the community) in communal idiom: in Sangren's cases, most often in pilgrimages and in ritual accounts of the beneficence of the deity. Thus,

Chinese images of supernatural power operate as alienating fetishes ... in two mutually authenticating ways. Chinese deities ... are alienated representations of the self-productive power on the one hand of social collectivities, and on the other hand of individual subjects. Moreover, the processes in which these alienated representations are produced are, at one and the same time, the processes in which both cultural subjects and social collectivities are also produced [38, pp. 67-68].

Now, a little reflection on all this leads directly to the conclusion that what form an alienated representation might take is absolutely irrelevant to the way it functions in the model: any representation which serves to promote communal solidarity and to mask its sociogenesis, and which provides the idiomatic basis for individual ritual self-production or reproduction, will do

just fine. Secular ideology or mythologized history works just as well as gods, and better than neoclassical economics. Mythologized history, not overtly invoking the supernatural, that functions as collective alienated representation I term "ideology."

For present purposes, ideology, like cult deity, is an "affectively toned complex" [34, pp. 268] of symbols, rhetoric, beliefs, and exemplary stories which taken together represent the collective history and cognitive suppositions of the group reciprocally and dialectically so defined. Such ideological representation of collective historical experience, drawn, as it purports to be, from occasions when the group acted efficaciously as a group, serves to increase the likelihood of similar collective action in the present or in the future. Such representation distinguishes insiders from outsiders, with all the behavioral expectations that such a distinction entails, and effectively masks the sociogenesis of collective solidarity. For the relevant group, it defines how the world was, is, and, most importantly, ought to be. Thus the behavior and collective consciousness of any social collectivity -- cult worshipers of Ma Tsu, neurophysiologists, petroleum engineers, managers of large steel companies, steel workers, business historians, agrarian Populists, or the oil fraternity in Texas -- in principle can be portrayed in this generalized, spatiotemporally universal model.

The demonstrated inability of egoistic incentive models to produce collective action (even when all would be better off should it occur) in the face of free-rider and transaction costs, as well as cognitive limitations, the failure of all known putative evolutionarily stable strategies beyond dyadic interactions, and the inability of cognitive scientists to show in-group bias or altruism beyond the size of likely ancestral kin-groups, all suggest the following strong hypothesis: Large scale, quasi-altruistic cooperation in groups larger ($>$) or very much larger ($>>$) than kin-group size does not exist and has not existed at any time, at any place, in any hominid (or possibly primate) society absent social processes of collective alienated representation and individual self-production in collective idiom. This claim is corroborated by what appears to be the virtual universal presence of such social processes in all complex societies, and is consistent with the argument that only through these mechanisms can complex forms of cooperation, with large spatial, temporal, and population dimensions, be organized.

Now, although the theme of this conference is explicitly business history and theory, I suspect some may feel that I've decidedly abused that license. Therefore let me try to address that most fearsome of all academic queries, SO WHAT? Let me try to do that by doing two things in the rest of this paper. First, I want to define the problematic -- to at least describe a historical problem I don't think more traditional approaches can solve. Second, I want to briefly outline how I think the approach sketched here does solve that problem, for the oil fraternity in Texas and for petroleum engineers, both conceived of as social collectivities in the sense defined above.

As some of you know, I've been working on petroleum engineering and the oil fraternity in Texas since so long ago Texans were rich.¹ Return with me now to those halcyon days of yesteryear, to Houston in 1978, and to Michel T. Halbouty:

The tyranny of government is everywhere! There are no mass executions of people, but there is a mass execution of the people's rights! We no longer live in a nation controlled by the principles upon which it was founded. Instead, we live in a land where federal politics dominates, controls, tyrannizes. The tentacles of a monstrous bureaucracy are enveloping and crushing our incentives and enthusiasm to produce and prosper -- which breaks the morale and spirit of man.

I would as soon be governed with a rifle at my head as to be bound hand and foot and gagged with the red tape of regulation [22, p. 251].

Now there is a businessman's businessman. This is no mealy-mouthed Milkenesque freen sitting in front of his computer screen carefully counting his hoard of marginal utiles. This is capitalism red in tooth and claw, the way god meant it to be.

Of course, we all know there's a snake in this Hobbesian Eden, and that snake is government -- Earnest O. Thompson, long-time chairman of the Railroad Commission of the State of Texas, in 1950, on the Commission's role in oil regulation, commonly called in Texas and the other mid-continent states, prorationing:

The regulation starts with providing rules for proper spacing of wells before drilling, testing of casing, protection against blowouts, protection of fresh water encountered in drilling, and then when oil or gas is found we test the wells and set a proper allowable for the wells and the fields so that the reservoir energy will be utilized in the highest degree and then, above all, when the ability to produce oil or gas is greater than the market demand, we allocate the market fairly to each of the 1700 oil fields and then distribute the fields' allowables among the 117,000 producing wells of the State so that every field and every well in each field has the opportunity to share ratably in the market demand for Texas oil.

In the beginning, we lost cases in the trial and error process, but today our orders stand sustained by all of the courts. As equally important, these orders have also been sustained by an enlightened public opinion [45, p. 10].

¹Dedicated to the heirs of Haroldson Lafayette Hunt and Hugh Roy Cullen: What's the quickest way to become a Texas Millionaire? Start off a Texas Billionaire.

Now I don't think it's hard to figure out that something doesn't match here. In plain fact, from the day in 1931 when he went to work as a chain-puller for the Yount-Lee Oil Co., Michael Halbouty has lived, and prospered mightily, in what is arguably the most stringently regulated industry in the United States. Some might dismiss the disjuncture between the rhetoric and the reality as mere mendacity, or the ideologue ravings so typical of those who confuse being rich with being wise. But I think something much more profound is going on here, something that matters greatly for business history, and for history more generally.

If you look closely at Halbouty's words, they are much closer in rhetorical form to those of a Populist firebrand, or a Farmers' Alliance organizer, or a circuit-riding preacher than they are to the carefully cadenced tones of the Business Roundtable. They look like the words that themselves used to be reserved for the trusts, the malefactors of great wealth, the "money power," or for home-made whiskey, loose women, and Satan himself [17, 18]. And so they are. Halbouty, like others of his ilk, is simply using the ancestral conceptual forms and categories to which the oil fraternity in Texas was heir to simultaneously ritually produce himself and the ideology, or alienated representation, of the fraternity itself. It's the ideology, the representation of the oil fraternity as the "greatest gamblers," the ultimate entrepreneurial risk-takers, the fiercest competitors, the men alone who can build a society where Everyman [5] has the "incentives and enthusiasm to produce and prosper." But it is also the ideology of fraternal autonomy, of equality, and, most of all, of opportunity and cooperation. No more for the oil fraternity in Texas than for their Southern agrarian forebears with "sandy land and hogs in the timber," are competition and cooperation antithetical [18, 32, 33].

And what then of "regulation?" Notice that Halbouty's tirade is against federal politics, not the Railroad Commission of Texas. Yet the simple minded assertion that the oil fraternity in Texas somehow "captured" the Texas Railroad Commission, yet feared the feds, is simply false: it makes just about as much sense to say that one has captured one's pancreas. Look again at Thompson's words: they are anything but adversarial. But they are more than that. They too are expressive of the ideological representation of the oil fraternity: they say equity, opportunity, cooperation, community, and, by 1950, "wise use," or, in Thompson's phrase, "that the reservoir energy will be utilized in the highest degree" [23]. By this account, the Railroad Commission of Texas is part and parcel of the oil fraternity: it shares, indeed is a co-producer of, the ideological representation of the oil fraternity, and Thompson is simultaneously producing himself, and the Railroad Commission, in communal idiom, all the while reproducing, with variation, that idiom.

What matters is that this entire edifice is a made and remade social achievement: tortuously, sometimes painfully made over half a century. For brevity's sake, let me just try to illustrate how tortuous that production process could be. William J. Murray, the first degreed petroleum engineer to serve on the Railroad Commission, before the Texas Petroleum Research Committee, in Tyler, Texas, May 7, 1954, trying to produce a socially acceptable relationship between regulation, opportunity, economics, and conservation:

Per-acre recoveries involve the question of economics. The Railroad Commission frequently takes the position that it is not supposed to delve into economics but operators cannot escape economic considerations.... A minimum number of unnecessary wells must be drilled. Unnecessary wells are those which contribute nothing to increasing recovery from a field. You can afford the luxury of unnecessary wells in prolific Woodbine fields but where per-acre recoveries are small you cannot drill too many of them or you will not recoup your overall investment. If it appears that there is danger of failing to recoup total investment, then indirectly the Railroad Commission must become concerned. We may say we do not consider economics and are only concerned about conservation, but if the operators find out they are not going to get their money back ... then there are not going to be any more wells drilled in the Deep Lime reservoirs and we will have 100 percent waste which is necessarily a concern of the Railroad Commission [42].

Once again appears the struggle simultaneously to both preserve and to reconstruct the reality the oil fraternity lived and the representation they shared..

Significantly, petroleum engineers, who by the mid-1950s were the largely unquestioned arbiters of what the physical and economic "realities" of different subsurface formations were, produced themselves and their knowledge -- their discipline -- in exactly the same way as any other social collectivity produces itself: by alienated, in this case ideological, representation. For petroleum engineers the ideological heritage was essentially that of positivist scientific knowledge -- notice the way Murray leaves the physical facts of the matter unproblematic and for practical purposes incontestable. But petroleum engineers were also engineers, the certified devotees of engineering's holy trinity: efficiency, efficacy, and economy. The particular cult deity petroleum engineers constructed to represent their power and their faith, and to mask their sociogenesis, they called MER, or "Maximum Efficient Recovery."

Let me conclude by claiming three strengths for the approach I've just offered, albeit in abbreviated form. First and foremost, it saves the phenomena: it explains the way the oil fraternity in Texas behaves, and, more importantly, how it cognizes and talks about its world, in a way and with a richness impossible within the austere confines of the egoistic incentive paradigm. Second, it offers a portrayal of all social collectivities and their means of social production that is absolutely symmetrical: no social resource or process is attributed to petroleum engineers, to high-energy physicists, or to the oil fraternity in Texas not equally attributed to the cult worshipers of Ma Tsu, to business historians, to our early hominid ancestors, or, just possibly, to some of our primate cousins or avian friends [9]. Third, the model sketched here provides collective consciousness without mysticism: only individual consciousness, social ritual, and self-production in collective idiom are required.

I believe this analytical apparatus solves my historical problem. I suspect it has wide applicability to organizational culture, to specific industry structure, to competitive oligopolists and altruistic monopolists, to regional economic traditions, and to labor-management histories. It admits of vastly more variety and historical contingency than interpretations derived from "universalistic" egoistic incentive assumptions. In my view, studying business or businessmen only within that narrow paradigm is very much like studying butterflies only in their caterpillar stage. Open the window only a little wider, and I think you will discover metamorphosed creatures of extraordinary intricacy, complexity, and maybe even beauty.

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