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## ***How outdated political institutions help world society elites***

„Termite or beaver?“, asked his bad tempered girl-friend the scientist, „what would you more like to resemble?“ Both species, she stated, did live on wood. Manipulating wood they sculpture their environment, thus improving both the defense of their group members and the breeding conditions for their offspring. „They are just like you: you are surrounded by manipulated wood covered with imprinting color, thus improving the living conditions of your group members and your personal offspring.“ But you can and can't be dispensed to chose: Or the beaver-option in small groups or the termite-option in large powerful states, being a threat for all competitors including yourself due to unsustainable consumption and technometabolism.<sup>1</sup> It's about space. You can't, this is my view, „re-think global society“ without considering the questions and claims of space. In this contribution I will in three steps ask 1. why and what for elites use outdated institutions, 2. how they do it, and 3. whether and how they could and can be stopped.

### **Elites – why and what for they use outdated institutions**

#### a. Elites.

With the exception of some very few solitary adult mostly male individuals, all primates including those calling themselves 'humans' have ever organized their lives and gathered their diets in groups.<sup>2</sup> Within these groups it's hardly ever possible to distribute absolutely same shares. Mostly, then, some members at the end of the day have had more food, more sexual partners, more chances to breed and to live longer, and are more respected by the others. This is what I want to call 'elite'. However, as the records of cultural anthropology suggest, many human groups, probably conscious about risks and consequences of growing elites, have tried to counter the development, and have put into vigor rules trying to avoid unequal shares. Other groups didn't. Like ours. But, what we can say about elites: They have successfully been avoided and fought.

And: The more a group owns and produces, the more inequality is possible and mostly reality. The larger a group grows, the larger possible differences of uneven shares become. Hence: who profits most of large and still growing groups, are ... elites.

Or we frame it with the american Park ranger in Arizona, philosopher and novelist Edward Abbey, who came to study English and Philosophy among others at the University of Edinburgh in 1950: It is the „observation that since few men are wise enough to rule themselves, even fewer are wise enough to rule others.“<sup>3</sup>

As you have noticed, I have described 'elites' as an almost universal phenomenon which is difficult but possible to avoid. So quite similarly to Charles Wright Mills, I would enclose upper hierarchies of different societal branches such as politics, economy, jurisdiction, military, and media. But, dif-

1 Technometabolism, “The materials and energy which flow into, through, and out of a human population and which are due to technological processes.” Stephen V. Boyden, *Biohistory. The Interplay between Human Society and the Biosphere*, Man and the Biosphere Series, Paris: UNESCO/ Parthenon 1992, p. 257.

2 Cf. Dunbar, Robin; Gamble, Clive; Gowlett, John, „The Social Brain and the Distributed Mind“, pp. 3-15, in: Dunbar, Robin; Gamble, Clive; Gowlett, John (ed.), *Social Brain, Distributed Mind*. Proceedings of the British Academy: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 4.

3 "Edward Abbey." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2010. 15 August. 2010, from: A Voice Crying in the Wilderness (Vox Clamantis en Deserto) : Notes from a Secret Journal (1990) ISBN 0312064888, [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/e/edward\\_abbey.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/e/edward_abbey.html).

ferent to many sociologists, I would see „elite“ as a mere relative term, consciously risking its possible loss of accuracy. Elite, then, would be always in a given amount of interconnected agents a fraction of (quite) less than the half having more access to and dominance of wealth, education, information and decisioning than the others. Here, I want to use „elite“ in the latter meaning.

b. Institutions.

What institutions are used and outdated? „Typically, contemporary sociologists use the term [institutions] to refer to complex social forms that reproduce themselves such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems. A typical definition is that preferred by Jonathan Turner<sup>4</sup>: 'a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.' Again, Anthony Giddens says<sup>5</sup>: 'Institutions by definition are the more enduring features of social life.' He goes on to list as institutional orders, modes of discourse, political institutions, economic institutions and legal institutions<sup>6</sup>. The contemporary philosopher of social science, Rom Harre follows the theoretical sociologists in offering this kind of definition<sup>7</sup> (Harre): “An institution was defined as an interlocking double-structure of persons-as-role-holders or office-bearers and the like, and of social practices involving both expressive and practical aims and outcomes.” He gives as examples<sup>8</sup> schools, shops, post offices, police forces, asylums and the British monarchy.”<sup>9</sup>

Robin Dunbar, head of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford, combines the establishment of institutions with the very invention of language keys “by creating linguistic categories for people and having rules about how to behave. For this, we usually put labels on people (silver stars for sherrifs, special robes for priests, crowns for monarchs etc) that allow us to identify the individuals concerned. I have argued that the military exhibit this to perfection.”<sup>10</sup>

b.1 Institution “society”.

First, I would oppose to the term „society“. Society, derived from latin socius, does insinuate a row or group of equal members, in whatsoever sense of being equal, on the same level.

In reality, global human population as well as probably most fractions thereof consist of a thin layer of individuals and their families which I would like to call „silverbacks“ in analogy to elderly male gorillas. Their share of wealth and influence exceeds those of the majority by dimensions. And at the bottom we find large masses of humans in the most different situations confronted in one or several issues with the possibility of annihilation of themselves and/ or their families. 11 percent of the world's population (like 700 million lives) in 49 countries sum up to 0.5 percent of global gross capita, just like the three most affluent men regarding their yearly income.<sup>11</sup> Enquiries show that even in economically difficult times as in the last two or three years social elites have enhanced their affluence distance to the average line. I agree with John Urry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sociology is beyond societies, that “if sociology is to make a pertinent contribution to the global era, it must abandon its original aim –the study of society as a set of institutions – and switch focus instead to the study of both physical and virtual movement.”<sup>12</sup> But different to Urry, who pledges for an

4 Turner, Jonathan, 1997, *The Institutional Order*, New York: Longman, p. 6.

5 Giddens, Anthony, 1984, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 24.

6 Giddens, Anthony, 1984, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 31.

7 Harre, Rom, 1979, *Social Being*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 98.

8 Harre, Rom, 1979, *Social Being*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 97.

9 Miller, Seumas, "Social Institutions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/social-institutions/>>.

10 Dunbar, Robin, personal communication to the author, e-mail, 14/07/2010.

11 Bauman, Zygmunt, *Flüchtige Zeiten. Leben in der flüchtigen Moderne. (Modus vivendi. Inferno e utopia del mondo liquido)* Hamburger Edition 2008, german, p. 13.

12 Cf. John Urry, *Sociology beyond societies: mobilities for the twenty-first century*, London: Routledge 2000, editorial announcement.

“agenda of [individual geographical; HSM] mobility”<sup>13</sup> and argues with the enormous scale of actual mobilities, globalization and the lack of “social governability”, I propose to drop the institution of the “individual” as well. Edinburgh's anthropologist Alan Barnard has recently presented his view, “when individuals do not stop at the skin”.<sup>14</sup> African hunters-gatherers, “at least until very recently, have been able to maintain relations to land, to resources, and to people through symbolic and socio-environmental ideologies undoubtedly reminiscent of those once shared by all humanity.”<sup>15</sup> This scientifically daring construction of a former ideology of everybody is backed by Barnard and his colleagues in this volume referring DNA- and other molecular findings saying “Humanity is descended in the common matriline from a small group of people living between 210.000 and 140.000 years ago [most probably all in africa; HSM; ...], divided into small isolated groups, and that matrilinear organization was likely.”<sup>16</sup>

#### b.2. Religion.

Following cultural materialist (Marvin Harris) or ecological anthropologist views (Stephen Boyden, Jared Diamond, Norbert Müller) one should stop to see religion as a separable social phenomenon and judge religion rather as social steering device. Its scientific isolation two hundred years ago in western social science was probably much owed to a legitimation process that provided in a still on-going alliance sacrosanct status and hence undisputed financing for both the modern state and modern (social) scientific community. The state was hereby stripped of questionable traditional metaphysical weight. And the middle classes, powerfully reaching out for a bigger share of the total wealth and status amount than in medieval societies successfully installed themselves close to the power as they are today. Scholars now speak of pressure groups of different secularisms.<sup>17</sup>

#### b.3. Nation.

27 years after Benedict Andersons coin of „imagined communities“, the nations, states I believe have lost many of their then sought after *raison d'être*. Only in olympics or a world tournament like the soccer world cup they do still serve as imagination and community-dispenser you can squeeze and get a driblet of nationality or community-feeling like liquid soap. The acceptance of a thought figure like nation and territorial nation-state enables for example european nations to reduce their expenses in military. Here you have a part of explanation why it is rationale for rich countries to support international tournaments like the world soccer championships: this is a powerful vehicle to transport the existence and legitimation of nations in everyone's mind. Five popular world championships reduce the risk for a world or transnational revolution by half, I would reckon. The otherwise totally ridiculous claim to respect an artificially drawn line on the ground, called nation border, thus gets imprinted deeply into the minds of millions of desperate young men and women, and they accept – again by millions – to risk their lives without loud decrying, endebting their families with absurdly high amounts of credit to pay the transversal of the borders, and accepting silently to be returned by the destination country – often again on their own dispenses. The „Nation“-choruses of millions of our class – everybody in this room – turn this „brashness“ into international law.

b.4. Those who use „modernity“ or „modern“ generally go along with the assumption

b.5-8. Individual/Person, High Culture; Democracy, Reason, Humans as different from animals.

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In this analysis I follow partly a line once established by the german-american-jewish tradition of materialist anthropology from Franz Boas to the late Marvin Harris with strong links to cultural

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13 Urry, 2000, p. 2.

14 Cf. Alan Barnard, “When Individuals Do Not Stop at the Skin”, in: Dunbar, Robin/ Gamble, Clive/ Gowlett (eds.), *Social Brain, Distributed Mind. Proceedings of the British Academy*: Oxford University Press 2010, pp. 249-268.

15 Barnard 2010, p. 265.

16 Barnard 2010, p. 264.

17 Cf. Casanova, José, “Eurozentristischer Säkularismus und die Herausforderung der Globalisierung”, pp.19-39, in: Guggenberger, Wilhelm; Regensburger, Dietmar; Stöckl (ed.), *Politik, Religion, Markt. Die Rückkehr der Religion als Anfrage an den politisch-philosophischen Diskurs der Moderne*, Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press 2009; Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, Harvard: Harvard University Press 2007; Jacobson, Janet R.; Pellegrini, Ann (ed.), *Secularisms*, Duke University Press 2008.

geography of Alfred Crosby, Stephen Boyden and William S. Neill, combined with paleoanthropological and primatological findings of Robin Dunbar. As usual it is of utmost importance when you look on society what you a priori ascribe to any singular representative of the category.

### c. Assumptions

Without being able to go deeper into this section here, I personally tend to follow three key assumptions of recent anthropology: humans as one of several migrant-waves, the large neocortex enabling competitive group- and sociality-sizes and necessities of organization explain the development of most interaction levels, forms, and hence, institutions.

c.1. Within the Out-of-africa theory modern humanity was just one of several hominins (including all human fossil ancestors and humans while hominids refers as well to all great apes) with large brains and technological knowledge that emigrated out of the african continent; other waves like the Neanderthals persisted for several tens of thousand years but then disappeared.

c.2. Following the „Social brain“-hypothesis many if not all of modern human features separating him from earlier hominins can be explained: „Our large brains have enhanced our social capacities – particularly the ability to track multiple interconnecting relationships – and introduced selective pressures to maintain and heighten these abilities in order to keep pace in the competitive landscape.“<sup>18</sup> „Human communities are distinguished by regular cooperation between non-kin and the individual's ability to extend their social presence across time and space, something that makes possible one of the features particularly characteristic of both chimpanzee and human sociality, namely fission-fusion organization, whereby the members of a community may be distributed over a wide area in subgroups of variable composition and temporal stability<sup>19</sup>. Such a capacity has clearly evolved, as has the human ability to aggregate and to organize settled populations through socially approved hierarchies.“ Thus humans achieve the basis for the development of a more complex material world like tools, enabling the groups to migrate successfully into habitats that were inaccessible for other hominins and hominids.<sup>20</sup>

c.3. Similarly to Dunbar, who among others has shown how the evolvement of language can be explained with the attempt of transcending the limits of affordable time to invest in one-to-one relations especially while grooming the others fur, some recent sociologists would explain a lot of institutions by the need to organize large-scale groups. „We begin childhood ready to soak up the particular beliefs of our own social group in much the same way we are prepared to learn our own language. [...] We cement our beliefs and relationships with our age cohorts (and the rest of our in-groups) during the initiation rites of adolescence, though modern society has a wide range of options available to fill this role if religion is not present or salient.“<sup>21</sup>

At this point it is where the importance of institutions start. When Dunbar has shown (1996 and more often) how language enables humans to maintain social bonds in groups larger than 150 he draws similar lines as scholars familiar to the functional approach to religion, referring to Emile Durkheim and others. Durkheim himself has written a little known work about „intellectuals“. From here one can show that the modern notion of the individual and „person“ together with human dignity is in the core of what should be seen as state religion: Believing that – in contrast to what it looks like on beaches, in graves and on crowded places – everybody is unique helps especially „modernized“ highly differently skilled and trained humans to obey all the common rules and orders that are similar for everybody, however.

Macrosociologically seen, however, the separation of military, politics, economy, religion and sci-

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18 Finkel, Daniel N.; Swartwout, Paul; Sosis, Richard, „The Socio-religious Brain: A Developmental Model“, pp. 283-307, in: Dunbar, Robin; Gamble, Clive; Gowlett, John (ed.), *Social Brain, Distributed Mind*. Proceedings of the British Academy: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 283.

19 Aureli, F. Et al., (2008), „Fission-fusion dynamics: new research frameworks“, *Current Anthropology* 49: 627-654.

20 Cf. van Schaik, Carel; Isler, Karin, „Gehirne, Lebensverläufe und die Evolution des Menschen“, pp. 142-169, in: Fischer, Ernst Peter, Wiegandt, Klaus (ed.), *Evolution und Kultur des Menschen*, Frankfurt a.M: Fischer 2010, p. 167.

21 Finkel, Daniel N.; Swartwout, Paul; Sosis, Richard, „The Socio-religious Brain: A Developmental Model“, pp. 283-307, in: Dunbar, Robin; Gamble, Clive; Gowlett, John (ed.), *Social Brain, Distributed Mind*. Proceedings of the British Academy: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 301.

ence are reasonable for their organization and public image, but obscure the fact, that the society as whole is depending for its subsistence on all of these sections of the cultural project.

My thesis is that this has been developing at least since the conversion from nomadic groups to sedentary or at least periodically storing groups – in different world regions and in different times. Both the chance for roaming people to accumulate transportable artifacts and to carry them along is limited, as the possibility of a labour divided roaming group to produce on any new given ground the necessary output of nurture and cultural items to be distributed to at least some group members. These limits can be and were overrun by sedentarism.

So far not many disagree. But I would go further. As I have shown earlier<sup>22</sup>, the underlying strategy can be called „artificialism“ as the idea, that any newly produced item does ameliorate the world (for us!) in comparison to one without the product. Precondition: the artifact helps in the struggle of life and production of the possessing group. We find a growing number of artifacts dating up to 2.6 million years before today.<sup>23</sup> In the first artificialist groups as in our recent global group, artifacts most often help both: the group in total and the elites to maintain and to enhance their status. The group with new helpful artifacts (when the production line starts they use to get more and more powerful) is simply better of than a competing group of the same species or, of course, other but ecologically rivaling species. So this is the reason to create large communities.

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## **Whether and how elites should and can be stopped**

Unfortunately most paleoanthropologists and other scientists show considerable lack of consciousness regarding the different motives within one societies. Dunbar e.g. is no exception when he writes “(agriculture and settlement in permanent villages) in part reflected a response to frequent attacks by neighbors. So the predators that drove group formation in primates are now replaced by predators from your own species. Famously, Chimpanzees exhibit the same problem (the several extinctions of communities that have been carried out by male raids). But this leads immediately to a war of escalation -- since victory always goes to the side with the larger force, there is pressure on both attackers and defenders to keep increasing their community size. This is the argument by Allen Johnson and Timothy Earle in "The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State" for the rise of kingdoms and city states through time. My argument is simply that we can do it (cognitively) but the mechanisms we use to achieve this are imperfect, and hence the fact that these kinds of super large communities are never as well integrated as small scale ones.”<sup>24</sup>

Lower classes cannot decide about alternatives. Middle classes like us at least can get aware of what they are helping to maintain. Upper classes finally can decide which option they want the whole society to chose. Although it is far from sure that then the society as well will opt for their choice, there is some choice.

The beaver-option for any given group of humans today is blocked, at least on the long run. By us. By you, me and everybody in modern global society. Only few so called indigenous groups or cultures do persist in remote areas or islands, most of them doomed due to alcoholism, loss of subsistence-areas like large rainforests or roaming areas.

Let's make a change.

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22 Cf. Schulz Meinen, Haimo, Die Staatsreligion. Menschenrechte kontra Naturschutz, (The State Religion) Marburg: diagonal 2000.

23 So in Gonar, Ethiopia; cf. Schenk, Friedemann 2005, p. 40.

24 Dunbar, Robin, personal communication to the author, e-mail, 14/07/2010.