

An evolutionary geography of environmental and social justice

Dragos Simandan

Geography Department, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1, Canada,
simandan@brocku.ca

To cite this article: Simandan D 2007 An evolutionary geography of environmental and social justice *Studia Ambientum* I (1-2), pp. 90-107.

ABSTRACT: Pornind de la premisele majore ale biologiei evolutioniste si psihanalizei, prima parte a articolului dezvoltă un model teoretic al naturii umane al cărui principiu esențial rezidă în afirmatia că specia noastră are un potențial înnașcut atât pentru a face bine cât și pentru a face rău. Pe baza acestui model, partea a doua explică rolul central jucat de invidie în semnalarea încheitării atât în interiorul unui aceluși mediu înconjurător, cât și între medii înconjurătoare diferite. Partea a treia a articolului explică motivele pentru care justiția ambientală și socială nu poate fi concepută dacă fenomenul invidiei umane este ignorat și prezintă un număr de șapte strategii prin care comunitățile umane din toate timpurile și toate regiunile geografice au încercat să soluționeze problema invidiei. În concluzia articolului, liniile directe ale argumentului vor fi combinate spre a sugera că o geografie atentă la dezvoltările din științele biologice poate să ofere explicații noi și penetrante ale cauzelor și consecințelor sentimentelor și politicilor publice care propovăduiesc idealul egalității sociale și ambientale.

Cuvinte cheie: micro-geografie, biologie evolutionista, inegalitate, invidie, justitie ambientală și socială, diferențe individuale și de grup

Introduction

The appeal to justice is often a mask for envy. (John Rawls, 1973: 540)

How relaxed are we about seeing our sense of justice based on envy? It seems we are now accustomed to God being dead, but would be reluctant to admit that social justice is dead. (John Forrester, 1998: 146)

One of the greatest things that Freud taught us is the fact that we are motivated to see reality through rosy glasses. Bare reality is too cruel and harsh for humans to endure. We are more selfish than we would like to accept. We are closer to animals than we are willing to concede. Freud praised the courage of those people who had the ability to take off their rosy glasses and confront reality as it is. At first glance, it might look like the scientific community is made of such people. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that there is a significant amount of residual positive delusions even among the most respectable scientists. Although our job is to find and disseminate the naked truth, the actual scientific practice remains more ideological than we would like to believe (Simandan, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). Very often we embellish the truth, by presenting only the acceptable parts of it. At other times, we stay away from finding the truth, because our intuition tells us that what

we are likely to discover will be dangerous knowledge. And because of that, we avoid digging deep enough and content ourselves with shallow investigations. At the heart of this coward attitude is fear. There is the fear that one will be stigmatized by colleagues and by the media for making outrageously unpleasant claims. And, then, there is also the fear about the negative consequences for social well-being of widely disseminating dangerous truths. The first type of fear is selfish and petty. The second type is an expression of responsibility and wisdom. But both types keep us further away from the task society pays us to do: the pursuit of the truth (Johnston & Sidaway, 2004). It might be the case that society does not benefit as much as we think it does from being told pleasant lies. It might be that true wisdom cannot follow from lack of intellectual honesty. These latter doubts about what we do as scientists pushed me to write this paper. It may feel like a cold shower, but cold showers have several positive effects. Chief among them is the fact that the improved circulation makes the body more alive. And if this is so, there is the corresponding chance that this paper will enliven the body of geographical theory in unforeseen ways.

The argument I want to put forward is that the emotion of envy is at the very heart of the human geographies we create around us. Envy is the emotion through which those who lost at the genetic lottery enhance their chances of reproductive success. Two mechanisms are responsible for this beneficial effect of an otherwise destructive emotion. The first of them is the creation of extra-friction for those who won too much at the genetic lottery. This extra-friction takes the form of progressive levels of taxation, anti-monopoly laws, and requirements such as monogamy. More stringently, I make the case that our stubborn delusion with the idea that all humans are equal results directly from the passion of envy. By framing all observed human inequalities as unfair, the deceptive idea of equality among humans creates a positive feedback loop that relentlessly increases both the intensity and the legitimacy of individual and collective envy. The political commitment for social justice is the translation into the moral and public sphere of the idea of equality among humans. In its turn, the commitment to social justice yields a set of practices such as redistribution, and the valuation of humility, tact and generosity, which have (a) the advantages of giving reparatory satisfaction to the envious and of keeping under tight control the risk of an upsurge in envy, and (b) the disadvantage of undermining excellence. Nevertheless, this disadvantage is partly overcome by the second beneficial mechanism of envy, namely the drive to emulate those we envy, and thus to keep intact our opportunities to spread our genes. The truly dark side of envy comes from the fact that although it enhances the reproductive fitness of those who lost at the genetic lottery, it is antithetical to what humans most want: happiness.

Although some philosophers such as Bertrand Russell have indeed noticed that “envy is the basis of democracy” (Russell, 1989: 64), my argument draws primarily on psychoanalytical theory and evolutionary biology. In the first part of the paper, I explain the complementarity of these two bodies of theory and the ways in which they enable us to move beyond the positive illusions of the “standard model of social science” (Cosmides & Tooby, 2006), for a dispassionate and honest consideration of the dark side of human nature. The second part of the paper traces the micro-

geography of envy and unravels its intricate relation with the practice of social comparison and the Darwinian struggle for reproductive success. This analysis will then lead, in the third part of the paper, to an understanding of the ideal and practice of social justice as an envy-mediated adaptive solution to the collective problem of the unfairness of the genetic lottery. Finally, the conclusion will dwell on how the taking into account of envy requires the anxiety-inducing habit of telling the truth as it is, but ultimately pays off dividends by enhancing the honesty of geographical scholarship (Johnston & Sidaway, 2004) in a number of significant ways.

Psychoanalytical and evolutionary reappraisals of human nature

Passions which work havoc in private life work havoc in public life also. (Bertrand Russell, 1989: 71)

The social sciences have entertained the idea that all humans are equal, as part of a broader conception of human nature that is now being referred to as the standard social science model of human nature (Buss, 1999; Cosmides & Tooby, 2006). The origins of this model reach back to the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau and his romantic idea that humans are born good, but lose their goodness because of the process of socialization (Rousseau, 1762/1979). What psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory have in common is their departure from the standard social science model and their agreement on a number of significant tenets about what makes us human. In what follows, I will mention these tenets and explain the conflict between them and the idealistic conceptualization of human nature in the social sciences.

The standard model assumes that humans are born with no genetic predispositions and that their brain is a blank slate or *tabula rasa*. This assumption entails the claim that at birth all people are equal and that later differences between people are the result of the play of social forces (Pinker, 2002). In other words, humans are 100% socially determined. If somebody becomes wealthy, it is not because she was born smart, but because she grew up in a privileged family, who provided her with the intellectual and social resources that allowed her to succeed. Conversely, somebody who ends up in jail is the passive victim of a set of social factors such as disorganized family, socialization in the wrong peer group, or lack of job opportunities, and not a psychopath born with an excessive amount of aggressive tendencies (Pérusse & Gendreau, 2005). Both psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory reject this assumption and argue that individuals are born unequal. Their particular biological endowment explains a large part of their way of navigating life. However, there is a difference of emphasis on this point between psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory. Traditional Freudian psychoanalysis admitted a role to biological predispositions, but argued that the family environment exerts a massive influence on the child (Freud, 1940). A child born in a normal, healthy family will have a different fate from a child born in a disorganized family. As he studied adults troubled by mental diseases, Freud sought to explain their malfunctioning by exploring their memories of their early childhood. Thus, an obsessional adult was usually explained in terms of a too severe toilet training in childhood, and a

hysterical person was normally explained by recourse to some real or imagined sexual abuse in her early years. However, a careful reading of Freud makes it very clear that he admitted that these explanations were provisional and speculative and that certain biological predispositions might actually be the ultimate cause of disease (Freud, 1940). What we do know now from the field of behavioral genetics (Plomin, 2004, Harris, 2006) is that we are born unequal and predisposed towards particular preferences and behaviors. All facets of personality as well as one's level of intelligence are at least 50% heritable. What is even more damaging to the standard model of the human in the social sciences is the fact that the heritability of intelligence and personality increases as we grow older. The older we get, the more free we become to do what we actually want (i.e. what our genes predispose us to prefer). If in childhood our true genetic penchants were distorted and controlled by parental pressure, later on these social pressures stop exerting their influence and the share of genetic influence increases steadily until one's late adulthood (Plomin, 2004). Not only that we are born unequal and with different genetic predispositions, but as time goes by and genes with late onset start expressing themselves, we grow closer and closer to our true DNA.

The second point of departure from the social science model and the most important for our subsequent discussion of envy refers to the fact that both psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory dismiss *the myth of the Noble Savage* (Pinker, 2002). People are not born all good and become evil because of unhealthy social forces operating on them. People are born with potential for good and evil. We are essentially selfish beasts interested in improving our lot in life (Freud, 1930/1989). We know now that there are genes for aggression (Pérusse & Gendreau, 2005) and that Freud was right in saying that the task of society is to tame this potential for aggression by sublimating it into socially acceptable things such as ambition, humor, and competition. In his mature theory of human nature, Freud (1940) captured the complex interplay of good and evil in our psychic life by postulating the existence of two dialectically opposed drives: Eros, or the life drive (our tendency to bond, to love, to cooperate, to empathize, etc) and Thanatos, or the death drive (our aggressive tendency, including emotions such as envy, jealousy, resentment, scorn, hatred, and anger; Raulet, 1998). If in its early days (Darwin, 1872/1998), evolutionary theory took a primarily negative view of human nature, more recently researchers in the field (Buss, 1999; Cosmides & Tooby, 2006) admit that we are born with potential for both good and evil, and that both of these potentials have adaptive value. The admission of an evil side to human nature demolishes the hopes of the social sciences in general and of Marxist theorists in particular about the creation of a peaceful utopian world, where everybody is equal and fraternity reigns. Society will always be a precarious achievement and the prospects of violence, war, aggression, and conflict will always lurk just below the appearance of harmony and civilization (Raulet, 1998; Di Chiarra, 2004).

Thirdly, both evolutionary theory and psychoanalysis dismiss the assumption of *the mind/brain dualism and the illusion of conscious free will* and replace these comforting myths with a courageous emphasis on the fact that we are driven by brain processes beyond our conscious awareness (Wegner, 2002). The standard social science model embraces the Cartesian notion of a mind based on, but distinct

from, the brain. In metaphorical language, the model conceives some sort of homunculus inside the brain, some sort of driver who has the power to control the brain. That homunculus is “us” – our sense of self-awareness, our experience of consciousness, our experiencing of qualia (e.g. the conscious experience of the redness of red when we see red). Until recently, the social sciences were able to get away with this theoretical model. Although Freud went at great lengths to explain the fact that we are driven by unconscious forces, his arguments have not radically challenged the standard model because for decades it has been easy to dismiss them as mere speculations. It is the swift progress of neuroscience and experimental psychology beginning with the early 1990ies that has vindicated Freud’s initial insights (Wegner, 2002). As evolutionary theorists, neuroscientists, experimental psychologists, and philosophers of the mind make sense of the ongoing stream of information from brain research, a very clear fact emerges: there can be no such thing as a mind independent from the brain, or a homunculus able to direct the function of the brain. There is nothing but the brain. The subjective feeling of conscious will and the feeling that there is a homunculus or driver directing our thought are just properties of the brain (Pinker, 2002). The moral implications of these findings remain to be fully spelled out, but at the very least they compel a reassessment of the question of individual responsibility.

The fourth point of departure from the standard model refers to *the centrality of sexuality* in both the psychoanalytical and the evolutionary theorizing of human nature. Writing in the first decades of the 20th century, Freud scandalized public opinion by claiming that even our most refined and noble activities are nothing but sublimations of sexual energy. The human beast derives the greatest gratification from the direct satisfaction of her sexual urge, but because civilization is incompatible with boundless sexual expression, the human beast is tamed to express her libido in indirect ways, such as literature, art, science, caring, sports, and friendship (Freud, 1930/1989). It is true that the specifics of Freud’s theory, and especially his focus on the oedipal triangle, have not found robust support in recent research (Harris, 2006). Nevertheless, the underlying idea of the centrality of sexuality to what makes us human has been powerful enough to resist the test of time. It is on this fundamental idea that psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory agree. At the level of specifics, the two schools of thought part company, but this should not detract from understanding their mutually reinforcing power to dismantle the edifice of the standard model.

The fifth element on which evolutionary theory and psychoanalysis meet each other refers to the stipulation of the *inherent conflictual nature of our mental life*. Freud believed that our activities are the result of the fight between three psychic instances (Freud, 1940): the id (the unbridled natural beast in us, driven solely by the pleasure principle), the super-ego (the moral conscience implanted in us by parents and society), and the ego (the arbiter of the fight between the id and the super-ego, guided in its decisions by the reality principle). Evolutionary theorists suggest that our behaviors are the consequence of the interplay of several inborn modules, such as the language module, the novelty module, the relationship module, the socialization module, and the status module (Buss, 1999; Harris, 2006). Both theories undermine the standard model of the human in the social sciences by

pointing out that we do not have unitary minds and that the mind is not some general purpose device. The emphasis on conflict between instances (Freud) or modules (evolutionary theory) suggests that we are forever condemned to be tormented by our inner struggles and that, therefore, happiness will always remain elusive to the members of our species (Haidt, 2006).

The sixth and final point of departure from the standard social science model consists in the rejection of the fact that we stand somehow above ordinary nature and the courageous acceptance of our *animality*. The social order is just a specific type of the animal order. Human nature is just an example of animal nature. There is no massive discontinuity between civilization and nature (Whatmore, 2002), and the fact that we share 98.5% of our genes with the chimpanzee (Pinker, 2002) gives a brutal quantitative understanding of this state of affairs. As evolutionary theorist Satoshi Kanazawa (2004) suggests, the implications of accepting our animality are unsettling, but ultimately progressive. The social sciences must accept the fact that they are branches of biology. Human geography must redefine itself as a component of biogeography. Social scientists and human geographers need to acquire biological literacy. We are not born *tabula rasa*, but with genetic predispositions. We are not noble savages, but animals who struggle with one another to spread their genes. We do not control ourselves, but are driven by largely unconscious biological urges. Sexuality is not one among the many components of life, but the central component from which all the others derive. We are not programmed to be blissfully happy, but to struggle continually to better our chances of reproductive success. We are not apart from the animal kingdom, but a part of it. Against this theoretical background, we can now move on to the next section, to consider the origin and development of envy, and to understand why is it that “the instability of social status in the modern world, and the equalitarian doctrine of democracy and socialism, have greatly extended the range of envy” (Russell, 1989: 70).

The micro-geographies of envy

I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy...surely it cannot be called innocence, when the milk flows in such abundance from its source, to object to a rival desperately in need and depending for his life on this one form of nourishment? Such faults are not small or unimportant...(St. Augustine, in Forrester, 1998: 133-134).

We all have a little devil in us. In Christianity, the theorization of our dark side took the form of the doctrine of the original sin. The opening quote of this section captures the essence of the micro-geographies of envy. Although the elder sibling has just been fed, he nevertheless feels envy when he sees his younger sibling being nourished. They are brothers, there is plenty of milk available, and there is no reason to conceive this primal scene as a zero-sum game, where one's win is another one's loss. But there is no place for reason at that early stage in life, nor is it much place for it later on (Pinker, 2002). We are driven by our passions, good or bad (Thrift, 2003, Simandan, 2006a). Psychoanalysts ranging from Sigmund Freud (1921/2004)

to Melanie Klein (1957/1997) have paid particular attention to the fate of the passions in the early years of human life. In analyzing the micro-geography of the mother with two children, Freud observes that humans are not born social animals. They become social animals because of social constraints imposed upon them (Freud, 1921/2004). The first, genuinely natural, reaction of the older sibling is to grow pale with envy at the sight of the nourishment of his brother. Because this reaction is totally unjustified and because the older sibling knows that his parents love his younger brother as well, he unconsciously transforms the original feeling of envy into its very opposite: brotherly love. This way he can deal with the original energetic load of the affect of envy without risking the rejection of his parents. In psychoanalysis, the transformation of one emotion into its very opposite because of social pressures goes under the name of reaction formation (Freud, 1940). Thus, excessive cleanliness is a reaction to unconscious passion for dirt, generosity is a reaction to unconscious selfishness, and fraternity (or social sentiment or team spirit) is a reaction against envy. The fact that envy is natural and comes before positive social sentiments such as fraternity raises several questions from the point of view of evolutionary theory. If evolution has endowed us with those emotions useful for the struggle for survival and reproduction, and envy is part of that natural endowment, what is the usefulness of envy? Furthermore, if Freud was right in seeing the feeling of fraternity and community as a reaction formation to envy, why is it that the process of conversion is never fully complete? Why do we still consciously feel envy later on in life, instead of always transforming it into fraternity and love? The following remarks (Greene, 2000: 405) will help us in answering these intriguing questions:

The human animal has a hard time dealing with feelings of inferiority. In the face of superior skill, talent, or power, we are often disturbed and ill at ease; this is because most of us have an inflated sense of ourselves, and when we meet people who surpass us they make it clear to us that we are in fact mediocre, or at least not as brilliant as we had thought. This disturbance in our self-image cannot last long without stirring up ugly emotions. At first we feel envy: If only we had the quality or skill of the superior person, we would be happy. But envy brings us neither comfort nor any closer to equality. Nor we can admit to feeling it, for it is frowned upon socially – to show envy is to admit to feeling inferior...So it goes underground. We disguise it in many ways, like finding grounds to criticize the person who makes us feel it: he may be smarter than I am, we say, but he has no morals or conscience. Or he may have more power, but that's because he cheats. If we do not slander him, perhaps we praise him excessively – another of envy's disguises.

The clue in this quote is inferiority. We become aware of our inferiority through the experiencing of envy (Schoeck, 1987; Smith, 2004). The feeling of envy is the tool provided by evolution to alert us to the situations in which others are better than we are. Although humans have to cooperate in order to defend themselves against the ravages of nature or of competing tribes (nations), they also have to compete *within* each group for reproductive success. Reproductive success in human communities is mediated by status (Buss, 1999; Kanazawa, 2004). If one is rich or smart or strong, one has status, and thus becomes an attraction for the females who are motivated to mate with males who are able to provide enough resources for child rearing.

When we feel envy, we know that we are losing status because somebody else is winning status.

This emotion triggers a call to action to prevent our further loss of status, and thus the loss of chances to spread our genes. The action we may take is of two kinds. On the one hand, we can try to improve our reputation by emulating our competitors and proving that we are as good as or even better than they are. If Harry's neighbor, Mr. Jones, buys an expensive car, Harry can use his envy to propel him to save money and buy an even better car. On the other hand, we can create extra-friction to slow the social ascension of our competitors. Thus, Harry can go at night and scratch with a stone Mr. Jones' new car. However, as Krebs and Denton (2005: 642) remind us in their new theory of morality, "people may use moral judgments for immoral purposes". Thus, rather than scratching Mr. Jones' car, Harry can be more devious and ruin his reputation by subtly spreading the gossip that Mr. Jones is cheating on his wife with another man and that this other man is the one who actually paid for the car.

Whichever of the two kinds of action one takes, the result is likely to improve one's relative social standing and hence one's chances of reproductive success. But there is more than meets the eye. People learn as they grow up that too much success will attract the enmity of the others and the very fear of the "Evil's Eye" moderates their desire for success. This moderating effect operates through self-regulation at two levels. The first is conscious, and consists in either the concealment of one's success, or in the setting of goals below one's potential. Because "envy...consists in seeing things never in themselves, but only in their relations" (Russell, 1989: 68), by concealing his success, Mr. Jones does not allow Harry to infer his inferior relation to Mr. Jones, and thus to experience envy. Instead of buying a car that would stir his envy, he could buy a cottage and never tell him about it. Alternatively, he might conceal his success from Harry by leaving that poor neighborhood and moving into an area where Mr. Jones' level of success is matched by the whole neighborhood. The downside of this alternative resides in Mr. Jones' being deprived of the subjective pleasure of knowing and showing that he is the best in the whole neighborhood. Evolution endowed us with experiencing positive emotions for those things that enhance our reproductive success and the blissful experience of standing out from the crowd is a case in point. The other route one can choose at the conscious level is the deliberate setting of one's goals below one's true potential. To give an example, if Mr. Jones is much better at basketball than Harry, he could opt to win at a moderate difference in order to prevent him from experiencing envy and humiliation. Although Mr. Jones has the possibility to score many points, he lets Harry save face and thus preserves his friendship. In other words, evolution instilled in us the required mechanisms for balancing two equally important tasks: the task to stand out and the task to fit in (Harris, 2006). Those who are tall poppies and want to grow even taller risk being excluded, and thus losing any chance for reproductive success (it takes two to have a baby). By moderating their ambitions, they sacrifice some improvement in status for the acceptance of their community.

But I suggested before that this moderation operates at two levels, really. So far, the focus has been on the conscious level. The second level of analysis concerns the unconscious. The psychoanalytical literature (Di Chiarra, 2004) has paid attention to

the fact that very often achievement of success is followed by the worsening of mental well-being. The reason is the unconscious fear of the Evil's Eye and the secret belief that one's success will soon be lost because at bottom it has been undeserved. The media fuel this process of self-sabotage by feeding the eye with images of people who starve, who are at war, who have been hit by misfortune, and by bathing the ear with an egalitarian discourse that looks down on selfishness and egocentrism and praises generosity and selflessness. Freud was naïve to imagine that the guilty conscience comes solely from early childhood; the present discourses that surround us are equally responsible for the sense of guilt of the wealthy. Although these egalitarian discourses undermine the happiness of the wealthy, they are useful for collective well-being by pushing those well-off towards charity and volunteering (i.e. acts of undoing the sin of their success).

In several of the examples given as I traced the micro-geographies of envy, the chief concern has been with how the successful (Mr. Jones) deals with the actual or potential envy of the loser (Harry). But before moving to the next section to discuss the dialectic of envy and social justice at the societal level, we need to pay attention to how the envious himself experiences envy. How about Harry's feelings? Why does he go so far so as to scratch his neighbor's marvelous car and to spread vicious gossips about him? Where does all that destructive passion come from? John Forrester (1998: 135) provides us with a very clear answer:

The awareness of the object envied and the awareness of one's own failure, one's own emptiness, go hand in hand; they are inseparable. Envy...the most 'sociable' of the passions...reveals one's fundamental failure in relation to the world, at the very moment where it reveals the causally linked success of another.

The person most dear to each of us is ourselves. Freud uses the concept of "primary narcissism" to emphasize this natural egocentricity and to make the point that all other forms of love (erotic love, love for one's friends, parental love, and love for one's profession) are the result of the projection of some of our initial libido onto an external object. One's child, one's lover, and one's hobby are all love-objects, i.e. external items that have been narcissistically invested by the subject. That investment is fragile. In Freudian terminology, if I lose my interest in something, I am withdrawing my libido from that item back into myself (Freud, 1940). When Harry sees his neighbor win, his narcissism is wounded. When our narcissism is wounded, we reveal our dark side (Di Chiarra, 2004). We regress to a more primitive self that is concerned with the reassertion of our narcissism, no matter what. The dark passions of envy, hatred, fury, and anger give us the energy to fight back and to reassert our self-esteem, but the price to pay for that increase in energy is the clouding of our better judgment and the uncovering of our antisocial self (Smith, 2004). These latter processes explain why Harry, an otherwise nice neighbor, lowers himself so much so as to scratch Mr. Jones' car without any trace of guilt. When Mr. Jones bought the car, he wounded Harry and lowered his reproductive chances by implicitly telling everybody that he is a better male than Harry. When Harry scratches Mr. Jones' car, he merely *reciprocates* what Mr. Jones did to him. In his eyes, he feels good about himself because vengeance – one of the passions through

which envy keeps us equal – has adaptive value and we feel good when we do things that increase our chances for life and reproduction (eating, mating, winning, etc). The evolutionary fact that whenever we win, we force our competitors to lose would prevent the emergence of peaceful communities. Everybody would be at war with everybody else (Raulet, 1998). By the introduction of the norms of social justice within each community, a relatively peaceful collective life and a sense of place (Thrift, 1999) become possible. However, our destructive tendencies (the death drive) do not disappear because of a mere commitment to social justice and egalitarianism. The safest way to deal with aggressive drives for any given community is to direct them outside that community in the form of hatred, envy, or fury against a common external enemy. As I am going to show next, from the local to the global, envy requires social justice, and social justice requires envy. We are not born to want to be equal, but we are born to want to have nobody better off than ourselves.

Seven social strategies against envy

What is subsequently found to operate in society as community spirit...undeniably springs from an original envy. No one should seek to stand out; all should be and possess the same. The implied meaning of social justice is that a person denies himself much in order that others, too, shall have to deny themselves as much. (Freud, 1921/2004: 75)

In the preceding sections, I outlined several strategies that the envious and the envied use in order to cope with this shameful emotion. Each strategy may work in some contexts, and fail in other contexts. When we move up the scale of geographical analysis from the individual to the level of communities and societies, it becomes apparent that the aforementioned strategies involve some limitations and some trade-offs. In what follows, I propose seven strategies through which societies deal with envy and explain their broader implications for social and economic life.

The first strategy is the social offering of *multiple avenues for standing out*. Given the fact that people are born with different gifts and passions, it stands to reason that the most effective way to tame envy is to allow each person to shine at what she does best and to make it clear through a reward system that the thing at which she stands out is socially valued. One can excel in intellectual endeavors, in music, sports, drama, painting, beauty, empathy and generosity, sexual prowess, industriousness, business talent, political acumen, bravery, or sense of humor. The individual who is socially appreciated for being above average in a given domain may be less likely to feel envy towards those good at other things, by over-valuing the domain of her excellence and de-valuing the other domains. Thus, somebody who is unanimously seen as the bravest kid in the neighborhood is also inclined to consider bravery the most important thing in the world and to look down at what he sees as others' "trivial" strengths in music or humor. The phenomena of over-valuation and de-valuation become amplified through the process of assortative mating. People good at sports will tend to make friends with other people good at sports and nerds will tend to befriend other nerds. Thus, their private acts of over-

valuation resonate with the views of their group and this virtuous circle of prejudiced agreement reassures them of their superiority. The problem with the first strategy is that very often the genetic lottery operates according to the “feast or famine” principle (Plomin, 2004). Those who are smart tend also to be more beautiful (Kanazawa & Kovar, 2004, Luxen & Buunk, 2006) and to have a heightened sense of humor (Jensen, 1998). Conversely, there are individuals affected by an unusually high load of damaging mutations, which have pervasive negative consequences for their chances to live a fulfilling life (Leroi, 2003). As Judith Rich Harris explains (2006: 246):

Humans have many ways of finding something to be good at but the limits put on them by their genes and their environment make some choices impractical, and some individuals are constrained to pick from a smaller menu than others.

A further limitation of the first strategy comes from the objective fact that not all gifts and talents have the same amount of social significance. No matter how we try to hide it, general intelligence tops the list of socially significant assets because it makes a difference across the board of human activities and because the most desirable jobs in any society require a level of mental ability that only a small minority of individuals can reach (Jensen, 1998, Gottfredson, 2006, 2007). Because of this state of affairs “...the sorting out of individuals according to their ability is very nearly the most delicate and difficult process our society has to face” (Gardner, 1984: 84).

The second strategy for dealing with envy is, as suggested in the story of Harry and Mr. Jones, the *deliberate concealment* of inequality in wealth and well being. This strategy creates uneven urban geographies, with neighborhoods for those less intelligent or less wealthy (intelligence and wealth tend to be positively correlated, for both individuals, e.g. Jensen, 1998, Strenze, 2007, and nations, e.g. Whetzel & McDaniel, 2006, Hunt & Wittman, 2007, Rindermann, 2007), and gated communities for the very smart and/or very wealthy (Davis, 1990; see also Simandan, 2006b). Because envy is a passion of the sight (you are not envious if you do not see another’s assets), this urban segregation prevents the explosion of envy and contributes to social peace. Writing on this point almost half a century ago, sociologist Michael Young (1961: 124) observes, in an unacceptably demeaning language, the benefit of concealing differences:

If...the stupid are kept together, they are not reminded at every turn of their inferiority. By the standards of the group in which they move and have their being they are, indeed, not stupid; here they are amongst their equals; they can even, in a modest way, shine in the display of their more commendable attributes. When they are amongst their equals, the great society does not press harshly upon them, nor resentments linger. They have the respect of their fellows in their own intelligence grade. This class solidarity, provided it is not coloured with a rebellious ideology, can be...a most valuable aid to the cohesion of society.

The limits of this strategy have become apparent with the spread of the modern media, since the early decades of the 20th century. Modern media fosters a general trend towards increased social transparency (cf. Barnett, 2003). Even if Harry lives in a different neighborhood than Mr. Jones, he might still experience envy because

he can watch at his TV the luxurious lifestyle that people in other neighborhoods enjoy. We live increasingly in a world where there is no place to hide and this puts a severe limit on all territorial strategies of segregation. While they might still work for securing the short-term peace of wealthy neighborhoods, they certainly fail to prevent the upsurge in envy among the destitute that are now forced by the media to keep aware of their inferiority.

The third strategy of envy prevention is a more radical form of concealment. Instead of hiding one's success, *one hides one's true potential*. The best way to prevent envy is by hiding one's success, and the best way to hide one's success is by not becoming a success in the first place. We can easily imagine a very bright teenager anxious to be accepted by her peers and to be desirable for potential mates. For her, the success brought by excellent grades would actually signify the failure to be accepted in the group and the failure to find a partner. If her hierarchy of values prioritizes social participation and erotic love above the cold loneliness of professional achievement, she may choose to hide her true intellect. Playing dumb would help her attract men and maintain friends. Karen Horney was the psychoanalyst who uncovered and deplored the pervasiveness of this typical female strategy in the first half of the last century (Horney, 1967). While the feminist movement has encouraged enormously the liberation of women from the curse of this strategy, the sad fact of deeply seated social prejudices remains. Even in our present day, highly successful professional women are less likely to find a partner, even if they are actively looking for one (McDowell, 2005). Moreover, the envy caused by women's success in the workplace may be one of the unacknowledged causes of the obstacles males place for them on the career ladder. Ultimately, hiding one's true potential is a loss for the respective individual and a loss for society at large.

If one takes a broad view of the history and geography of political regimes (Rawls, 1973), one can detect that a fourth strategy that mitigates envy is the organization of society along the ideological lines of a *hereditarian "natural order"*. If Harry had been born in 18th century England, he wouldn't have felt envy towards Mr. Jones because his parents would have educated him to see Mr. Jones as a different kind of human being: somebody chosen by the grace of God, somebody with blue blood, somebody above the ordinary masses. This ideological indoctrination could have ensured a relatively peaceful social order for a long period of time, because it would have ruled out the very idea of vertical social mobility and the very concept of equality between all people. Be that as it may, but the problem with this strategy against the envy of the masses is the relentless operation of the genetic phenomenon called regression to the mean (Plomin, 2004). Regression to the mean tells us that the children of two dumb parents tend also to be dumb, but less dumb than their parents. Conversely, the children of two intelligent parents, tend to be intelligent as well, but less intelligent than their parents. What this means is that as generations of people unfold in time, the smart and the dumb tend to be distributed across the tight lineages of the alleged hereditarian natural order. It may well be that Mr. Jones' grandfather was very smart and thus was knighted by the monarch, but chances are that Mr. Jones himself is much less sharp than his grandfather. And if our Harry happens to be smart, he can notice that the whole talk about the aristocrats being

superior to him is simply dust in one's eyes. By finding other smart people born in the inferior classes, Harry could start a revolution that would overthrow the empty ideology of a natural order. We owe the revolutions of the Enlightenment to the smart Harries of the time.

The fifth strategy against envy is somehow paradoxical, because it uses the very passion of envy to fight against its otherwise destructive effects. A *meritocracy* is a system that purports to give equal chances to all the envious to *emulate* the envied and to do at least as well as they do (Young, 1961). Instead of hiding the envied, a meritocracy displays them in their full glory to stimulate the envious to put more effort to succeed (Schoeck, 1987). The general message "If they did it, you can do it too" is full of optimism and naïveté. The consequences are of a mixed kind. On one hand, the view of others' success and the belief that one can do it too if one just tries hard enough, makes many people try harder than they would have tried otherwise. This effort certainly benefits society, and, to some extent, it also benefits the individual concerned. On the other hand, by providing equal chances of success for all, a meritocracy crushes psychologically those who fail because they have absolutely no means for saving face. They are the only ones to blame for their failure and it might well be that the upsurge in depression in the last decades in the advanced capitalist world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Haidt, 2006) is causally linked with this peculiar way of distributing blame. The moral dilemma of meritocracy resides in its discourse of equal opportunities. While it is laudable that it tries to give equal chances to all the citizens and that it cultivates collective optimism, it is ultimately vicious because it obliterates the fact that the genetic lottery does not give us equal chances at all (Rawls, 1973). Not everybody can become a Pavarotti, Einstein, or Picasso. A meritocracy merely gives a chance to win to those who have already won at the genetic lottery. As time goes by, the cleavage between the envied wealthy and the envious poor grows larger and the meritocratic system becomes increasingly threatened by the consequences of its own lies.

The sixth strategy of dealing with envy is the *distraction of the attention* from the internal cleavages of a given community towards a real or fabricated *external enemy* (Spears & Leach, 2004). Given that humans have the potential for both positive (Eros) and negative (Thanatos) affects, a leader can enhance love and peacefulness within her community by channeling all hatred, envy, and fury on an outside enemy. In Freud's own words (1930/1989: 72), "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness". The problem with this strategy is that it works well only in the short-term. At bottom, this strategy consists in the mere procrastination of a solution to the real problem of wider social inequality and envy. When the enemy disappears or becomes harmless, the buried social conflicts of the community emerge with renewed force and press for a radical resolution.

Finally, the seventh strategy for handling the destructiveness of envy is the *institutional creation of extra-friction* for those who threaten to become enviable. This strategy relies on loudly declaring the falsehood that all people are equal and on arranging the societal mechanisms in such a way so as to make that falsehood seem true. The genetic lottery creates a minority of people that could be called "natural

aristocracy” or “the lucky lot”. Included in this group are the individuals endowed with an excellent constellation of genes for intelligence, ambition, and likeability. If left to compete in a truly free market, they would easily grab most of the resources available and thus win the competition for spreading their genes to the detriment of the rest of us. The only problem with the lucky lot is that they are always a small minority (Jensen, 1998; Rawls, 1973). The average Joes can prevent the lucky lot from grabbing all resources by the institution of a democratic regime: regardless of wealth and ability, every person has the right to one and only one vote. By mathematical necessity, a democracy allows the average Joes to control the lucky lot through the means of the state. The business of the modern welfare state is to arrange reality in such a way so as to make it seem that all people are indeed equal. The state does its job by using ideological state apparatuses (especially the school system) to indoctrinate all people with the idea that all humans are born equal, as well as by the creation of extra-friction for the lucky lot. Extra-friction begins with the introduction in the school system of the principle of lockstep progression (Gardner, 1984). No matter how intelligent one is, one has to progress from one grade to another just like everybody else. If all pupils graduate from high-school at the same age, we obliterate the fact that some people learn twenty times faster than other people (Jensen, 1998) and we keep alive the illusion of equality. Extra-friction continues in the workplace by the introduction of collective agreements, of the principle of progression through the ranks based on requisite experience (and not on sheer performance), by the progressive taxation of income, and by the creation of anti-monopoly laws.

Finally, and of direct relevance for an evolutionary perspective on envy and inequality, extra-friction is introduced in the civil system by the institution of monogamy. No matter how wealthy one becomes, one has the right to spread his genes only with one wife at the time. This institution makes sure that, even if the extra-friction imposed on the lucky lot in the school system and the workplace has failed to stop them from becoming enviable, they would still not get an unfair amount of reproductive advantage. In essence, the genetic lottery has given too much to a tiny minority of people and the job of a modern society is to undo that unfair distribution by putting extra-burdens on the shoulders of that privileged minority. Social justice is the antidote to genetic injustice and thus plays a significant role in the geography of evolutionary struggle.

Conclusion

Without envy, not only would there be no *need* for a judicial apparatus; there would be no *desire* for justice. (Forrester, 1998: 132; emphasis in original).

Envy is itself a terrible obstacle to happiness. (Russell, 1989: 67)

Envy, I have tried to show, is the dark passion that saves us from death. If it were not for envy, we would not care that the lucky lot grabs all the resources and eliminates our opportunity to spread our genes. The visceral experience of envy mobilizes our bodies to fight for our reproductive survival. We may try to emulate

the envied and this means that Bertrand Russell (1989: 66) was only partly correct in asserting that “if this passion is allowed to run riot it becomes fatal to all excellence”. By fostering emulation, envy can foster excellence, a point well exploited by the meritocratic strategy. We may try to create extra-friction for the envied, either at the individual level (Harry scratching Mr. Jones’ new car with a stone) or at the collective level (the scholastic lockstep, progressive taxation, monogamy). At first glance, this second route is pathetic, but one needs pathos if one wants to remain alive (cf. Thrift, 2003). After casually noticing that “modest people...are particularly prone to envy” (1989: 69), Bertrand Russell (1989: 70-71) puts the finger on what he finds unacceptable about envy-based social justice:

While it is true that envy is the chief motive force leading to justice as between different classes, different nations, and different sexes, it is at the same time true that the kind of justice to be expected as a result of envy is likely to be the worst possible kind, namely that which consists rather in diminishing the pleasures of the fortunate than in increasing those of the unfortunate.

His remarks miss the very logic of social justice. In order to increase the pleasures of the unfortunate, one must diminish the pleasures of the fortunate, because we are wired to experience envy (displeasure) whenever we see that others are better off than we are. Evolution endowed us with this mechanism to save us from death (lack of offspring) and we should stop being ashamed to admit that we experience envy. Ideals of social justice spring from envy and do the great job of compensating for the unfairness of the genetic lottery. Although “people...attempt to foster their interests by invoking self-serving principles of equity” (Krebs & Denton, 2005: 642), there is nothing wrong with taking this route in the big scheme of the struggle for survival (Cosmides & Tooby, 2006). If there is a true problem with envy, then that problem has to do with what we feel we most want: to be happy. Evolution saved us from death by endowing us with the possibility for envy, but the gift comes with a price: envy causes unhappiness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). And that unhappiness pushes us into acting and striving to better our stand in life. If those committed to social justice think that this ideal will make people happy, they are wrong. Social justice helps our genes, not ourselves.

References

- Barnett C, 2003 *Culture and Democracy: Media, Space and Representation* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh)
- Buss D, 1999 *Evolutionary Psychology: the new science of mind* (Allyn & Bacon, New York)
- Cosmides L and Tooby J, 2006 *Universal Minds: Explaining the new science of evolutionary psychology* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT)
- Darwin C, 1872/1998 *The expressions of the emotions in man and animals* (Oxford University Press, New York)

- Davis M, 1990 *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (Verso, London)
- Di Chiarra G, 2004 *Syndromes psychosociaux. La psychanalyse et les pathologies sociales (Psychosocial syndromes. Psychoanalysis and the social pathologies)* (Éditions Érès, Ramonville Saint Agne)
- Forrester J, 1996, "Psychoanalysis and the history of the passions: the strange destiny of envy", in *Freud and the passions* Ed J O'Neill (Pennsylvania University Press, University Park, PA) pp 127-149
- Freud S, 1930/1989 *Civilization and its discontents* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York)
- Freud S, 1940/1979 *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (Hogarth Press, London)
- Freud S, 1921/2004 *Mass psychology and other writings* (Penguin Books, London)
- Gardner J W, 1984 *Excellence: Can we be equal and excellent too?* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York), revised edition.
- Gottfredson L S, 2006 Social consequences of group differences in cognitive ability (Consequencias sociais das diferencas de grupo em habilidade cognitiva). In Flores-Mendoza, C. E. and Colom R., Editors, *Introducau a psicologia das diferencas individuais*. ArtMed Publishers, 433-456.
- Gottfredson L S, 2007 "Innovation, fatal accidents, and the evolution of general intelligence". In M. J. Roberts (Ed.), *Integrating the mind: Domain general versus domain specific processes in higher cognition* Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 387-425.
- Greene R, 2000 *The 48 laws of power* (Penguin Books, New York)
- Haidt J, 2006 *The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom* (Basic Books, New York)
- Harris J R, 2006 *No two alike. Human nature and human individuality* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York)
- Horney K, 1967 *Feminine Psychology* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York)
- Hunt E, Wittman W, 2007 "National intelligence and national prosperity" *Intelligence*, in press
- Jensen A R, 1998 *The g factor: The science of mental ability* (Praeger, New York)
- Johnston R J and Sidaway J D, 2004 *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American human geography since 1945* (Arnold, London), sixth edition.
- Kanazawa S, 2004, "Social sciences are branches of biology" *Socio-Economic Review* **2** 371-390
- Kanazawa S, Kovar J, 2004, "Why Beautiful People Are More Intelligent" *Intelligence* **32** 227-243
- Klein M, 1957/1997 *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works: 1946-1963* (Vintage, London)
- Krebs D L, Denton K, 2005, "Toward a more pragmatic approach to morality: a critical evaluation of Kohlberg's model" *Psychological Review* **112** (3) 629-649
- LeRoi A, 2003 *Mutants: On Genetic Variety and the Human Body* (Viking, New York)

- Luxen F M, Buunk B P, 2006, "Human intelligence, fluctuating asymmetry and the peacock's tail: General intelligence (g) as an honest signal of fitness" *Personality and Individual Differences*, **41** (5) 897-902
- McDowell L, 2005, "Love, money and gender divisions of labour" *Journal of Economic Geography* **5**(3) 365 - 379
- Pérusse D, Gendreau P L, 2005, "Genetics and the development of aggression", in *Developmental origins of aggression* Eds R E Tremblay, W W Hartup and J Archer (Guilford Press, New York) pp 223-241
- Peterson C, Seligman M, Eds, 2004 *Character Strengths and Virtues A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford University Press, New York)
- Pinker S, 2002 *The blank slate: the modern denial of human nature* (Viking Penguin, New York)
- Plomin R, 2004 *Nature And Nurture: An Introduction To Human Behavioral Genetics* (Wadsworth Pub Co, London)
- Raulet G, 1998, "La mort aux deux visages. Sur le statut de l'agressivité et de la pulsion de mort dans *Malaise dans la civilisation* (The death with two faces. On the status of aggression and of the death drive in *Civilization and its discontents*)", in *Autour du 'Malaise dans la culture' de Freud (On Freud's 'Civilization and its discontents')* Eds J Le Rider, M Plon, G Raulet and H Rey-Flaud, (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris) pp 55-78
- Rawls J, 1973 *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, Oxford)
- Rindermann H, 2007 "Relevance of education and intelligence at the national level for the economic welfare of people" *Intelligence*, in press
- Rousseau J-J, 1762/1979 *Emile* (Basic Books, New York)
- Russell B, 1989 *The conquest of happiness* (Unwin Paperbacks, London)
- Schoeck H, 1987 *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior* (Liberty Fund, New York)
- Simandan D, 2002 *The truth regimes of the past*, Arad, 'Aurel Vlaicu' University Press [Regimurile de adevar ale trecutului]
- Simandan D, 2005a *New Ways in Geography* Timișoara, West University Press
- Simandan D, 2005b *Pragmatic Skepticism and the Possibilities of Knowledge* Timișoara, West University Press
- Simandan D, 2006a *Marginally Modern. Psychoanalysis and the deconstruction of inadequate communities* Arad, 'Vasile Goldiș' University Press
- Simandan D, 2006b 'The g factor and the geographical law of place-induced cognitive emergence' In *Economic Science in a Knowledge Society, Proceedings of the International Conference 'Research and Education in the Innovation Era'*, Timisoara: Mirton Publishing House, pp. 80-90
- Smith R, 2004, "Envy and its transmutations", in *The social life of emotions* Eds L Tiedens, C W Leach (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) pp 43-63
- Spears R, Leach C W, 2004, "Intergroup *Schadenfreude*: conditions and consequences" in *The social life of emotions* Eds L Tiedens, C W Leach (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) pp 336-356

Strenze T, 2007 "Intelligence and socioeconomic success: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal research" *Intelligence*, in press

Thrift N, 2003, "Bare Life", in *Dancing Bodies* Eds H Thomas, J Ahmed (Routledge, London) pp 145-169

Thrift N, 1999, "Steps to an ecology of place", in *Human Geography Today* Eds J Allen, D Massey, P Sarre (Polity Press, London) pp 295-321

Whatmore S, 2002 *Hybrid Geographies* (Sage, London)

Wegner D, 2002 *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA)

Whetzel D L, and McDaniel M A 2006 "Prediction of national wealth" *Intelligence* **34 (5)**: 449-458

Young M, 1961 *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Penguin Books, London)