

# Chimpanzees Against the State

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“The roots of politics are older than humanity,” writes Desmond Morris in his new book *Chimpanzee Politics*. He contends that chimpanzees have well-developed political systems, demonstrating that humans are not so much “fallen angels as they are risen apes.”

Basing his argument on a study of chimpanzee behavior by Dutch biologist Frans de Waal, Morris writes: “There is hardly anything that occurs in the corridors of power of the human world that cannot be found in embryo in the social life of a chimpanzee colony.”

Helen Fogel, a science writer for the daily *Detroit Free Press*, recently interviewed de Waal at the University of Wisconsin Primate Research Center; he told her that his research made clear that “the hankering for power is almost certainly inborn.” Such a statement, while it may provide aid and comfort to politicians would seem—considering the behavior of the powerful throughout history—to imply a rather dismal conclusion about human nature.

However, de Waal points out an interesting fact that might suggest that he (and Desmond Morris) had made a common error of observation: the error of anthropocentrism. In this case, de Waal and Morris have assumed a certain conception of politics to be universal, then have projected this conception onto chimpanzee communities, where it does not belong.

According to Fogel, de Waal’s study shows that “when a male chimp becomes leader, it did not mean he received the lion’s share of food. Instead it became his duty to apportion all the food among other members of the colony. He was expected to intercede in behalf of the weaker members of the community to maintain social stability. According to de Waal, the chimps’ sense of community means a leader maintains his ‘respect from below rather than intimidation and a show of strength from above.’”

Now, this description of the relationship between leader and group is strikingly similar to the relationship of chief to community in primitive societies, except that the accent is misplaced. The chief, as Pierre Clastres indicates in *Society Against the State*, is the “captive” of the community. His position is based on prestige, not power. He is an advisor, a mediator, not a despot. He does not command, nor does the group obey. He persuades. He has exorbitant obligations to the community; to maintain the peace, to mediate disputes, to tell stories, to ensure the equitable distribution of food. Prestige is inversely related to material wealth: the more the chief gives away and the poorer he becomes, the more his prestige accrues. In short, reciprocity is an ingenuous method of preventing the chief from acquiring power and becoming a despot. Clastres says that societies with a state are distinguished from stateless societies precisely by whether the egalitarian principal of reciprocity is observed.

It would seem, in this respect at least, that de Waal and Morris are blind to a crucial distinction. For it is not the behavior of the despot—a relationship of power, of non-reciprocity—that exists in embryo in chimpanzee communities. On the contrary, chimpanzee behavior indicates that fundamentally, power is held by the group at large. The despotic relationship—what we call politics—is excluded from chimpanzee and primitive human communities alike. Only in this sense, then, can we conclude with de Waal that human political activity “seems to be part of an evolutionary heritage we share with our close relatives.” Perhaps the greater share of confusion on this matter should be attributed to Morris rather than de Waal. The author of such books as *The Naked Ape*, Morris is a notorious popularizer whose confusions about the connection between supposed primate violence and human behavior

are well known. It is hardly surprising, then, that he would see in the primate world a mirror of the pathological violence of state societies. No more surprising, say, than those Marxists who see production relations in primitive society, or who equate a spear with a nuclear warhead. No more surprising; but just as shortsighted.

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