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Homo historicus: History as psychological science

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Homo historicus: History as psychological science

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Abstract

Historical myths are indeed a mystery in need of explanation, and we elaborate on the present adaptationist account. However, the same analysis can also be applied to motivations to produce and consume history in general: that humans produce and consume history is also a mystery in need of psychological explanation. An adaptationist psychological science of history is needed.

As we mourn the passing of John Tooby, it is worth noting one of his many under-appreciated (in addition to his many appreciated) insights: that historical events don't face a replication crisis, and that insofar as the historical record is accurate, any science of human nature and psychology had better have a causal account of what led up those events. John's recurring insight, echoed in the well-researched target article, is to use real-world outcomes as proper *explananda*, the thing to be explained.

And the target article delivers. To see historical myths as a puzzle, and to be clear-minded about their recurrent features and whether existing accounts explain those features, is a deep virtue. Sijilmassi et al. (2024) posit that historical myths function as coalitional recruitment technologies shaped to advertise high fitness interdependence among sets of agents and provide comprehensive *historical* evidence to support their arguments. We don't disagree with this analysis, quite the opposite, but we do think that the deep conceptual analysis underlying the present account can be taken further, in several directions. And in the process, we'd like to head off a possibly overly-facile reading of their valuable work.

Science, like religion, traffics in mysteries, and it is instructive to articulate Sijilmassi et al.'s mystery: It is events of the distant past “with much less obvious impacts on current affairs” that constitute the puzzle or mystery:

“Historical myths, by contrast, are especially puzzling because they commemorate a very distant past or aspects of the group's history with much less obvious impacts on current affairs....Hence, in the following, we focus on accounts that explicitly try to answer the main puzzle of historical myths, which is why a shared history is perceived as an essential condition for group cohesion in many societies.”

These non-obvious phenomena are then contrasted with phenomena with more straightforward explanations:

The discussion of these mechanisms highlights the specificity of historical myths compared to other politically salient information about history. While we acknowledge the importance of the latter, they were not included in the scope of this article. The main reason is that they have quite straightforward explanations. In all of the listed alternative accounts, the historical material has a relatively clear connection to pressing issues in the present.”

We agree with the spirit here, but not the letter. From the perspective of what social scientists deem provocative enough to study, Sijilmassi et al. are indeed right: they bear a burden of arguing for why historical myths are a puzzle at all. And so, it is fair to contrast distant myths with more straightforward phenomena.

But, from the perspective of how the underlying psychology works—the design of the proximate psychology, to put it in Tinbergian terms—there are no straightforward explanations of how even phenomena with “straightforward explanations” work. Analogously, it is no mystery why humans can see rocks and cliffs, but how they manage to do this, and thereby avoid running into and over them, is a mystery, and one aided by adaptationist analysis.

Although an apparently minor point, we would suggest that from this perspective of worrying about the psychology, one is forced to reframe the entire issue as mysterious: Namely, the human capacity for history is deeply psychologically mysterious. Humans appeal to the past, and they communicate and receive information about past events from others. This sets up a set of selection pressures in the design of systems to craft motivations to broadcast and then again evaluate and respond to historical information.

Several points follow from this psychology-first point of view. First, historical myths are on this view grounded in more fundamental principles of cognitive adaptations. These may include *collective situational templates* (e.g., humiliation, retaliation): psychological templates which play an important role in recruiting and maintaining allies by creating an immediate understanding of situations. For instance, the “Retaliation” template comes equipped with built-in intuitions about the rationale for action, the risks of inaction, the inherent benefits of negative reciprocity, and the acceptability or even praiseworthiness of (defensive) aggression. Consequently, appeals to something like ‘Retaliation’ creates an immediate co-registering of the fitness interdependencies at stake. Cultural myths are then elaborated cultural technologies built upon templates such as these.

Second, focusing on the proximate psychology allows us to derive predictions about effective coalitional recruitment strategies. For instance, variations in payoffs between offensive and defensive aggression have shaped the development of proximate mechanisms that reflect these differences (De Dreu & Gross, 2019; Lopez, 2017). As such, defensive aggression is easier to coordinate and morally justify to allies (Pietraszewski, 2016). So, when the goal is to recruit militant allies, one should expect privileging of justifications over offensive ones. Indeed, such framings are frequent among violent extremists, where a process of ‘typification’ – modeling a personal plight as a specific instance of a prototypical collective situation – is common (Moncrieff & Lienard, 2023).

Relatedly, Sijlmasi et al. also discuss how self-interest often motivates the production of historical myth, and here we would suggest that by evoking collective situational templates, agents may at times conceal their underlying self-interests by framing individual actions in ways that appeal to a broader audience (e.g., actions are ‘for the greater good’). Deceptive agents may thereby portray themselves as altruistic and cooperative while covertly pursuing aggressive, self-serving actions. In contrast, agents with already broad support might communicate straightforwardly, openly justifying their aggressive actions with confidence, reflecting a clear alignment with their self-interests. The motivation to seek out reasons and justifications to mask self-interest may thus be integral components of coalitional recruitment psychology. For instance, envy not only drives motivations to eliminate perceived competitors, but it also conceals itself by framing situations as coalitional, prompting a search for reasons and justifications to align with others (Moncrieff & Lienard, 2023).

Third and finally, an adaptationist task analysis of history—of what an evolved organism would need to do to create and maintain representations of past events—is sorely needed to point out what to look for within the human mind, and within historical phenomena in general, myths included.

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