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Markets, Religion, Community Size and the Evolution of Fairness? Not really

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Abstract

An influential theory of human fairness has suggested that norms of equity evolved as community sizes grew, markets and institutions stabilized and world religions came about. The theory assumes that humans predominantly interacted with kin in the evolutionary past, lived in genetically related groups and did not have formal norms of cooperation. In this article I present anthropological evidence to the contrary. Contemporary hunter-gatherer societies from around the globe live in nomadic camps with fluid membership and low genetic relatedness; cooperate extensively based on principles of need, equity and reciprocity; have high prevalence of food sharing, cooperative hunting and alloparenting; and demonstrate formal norms of redistribution for essential goods. This directly contradicts the claim that fairness is a recently evolved disposition for market-integrated societies.