

before that: hunting and gathering groups who are egalitarian and actually quite respectful of one another's rights within the band, but who are nevertheless in a chronic state of war with all of their neighbours.

Not huge numbers of people get killed by all of this, although not tiny numbers either. Somebody's calculated that in the case of the Yanomamo, who are an Amazonian group, 25 percent of the adult males eventually get killed in war. But then at least 25 percent of the women die in childbirth. Getting born is dangerous. And this manner of doing business works for the society.

Now let's take these hunting and gathering bands, with their deeply rooted, maybe even genetically encoded, traditions, and transpose them to Mesopotamia 8 000 years ago, or any subsequent urban civilization. Population density shoots up: we're now talking societies of 100 000, 500 000, a million very quickly. How do you run such societies? (And they need to be run, lots of decisions to be made now.) The old system for making decisions, where perhaps 70 or 80 adults in the band of 200 sit around and talk about it, isn't going to work at a population of 100 000, let alone a million. The people in these new "mass" societies can't all talk to one another. There is no way that they can even discuss a common agenda.

The only way big societies like that can be run, at least for a very long time, is from the top down, by force. All the surviving mass societies we know about, all civilizations, from the very beginning are tyrannies. They are pyramidal organizations of power and privilege enforced by violence. Nothing else exists in the historical record for societies of more than a million people. You can have a democracy for a few thousand privileged citizens in a place like classical Athens, because a few thousand people in a public space can, with a great deal of effort, hear each other's arguments and reach a joint decision. But as soon as you hit a million it's a tyranny, and probably a good deal before that.

So all the civilizations are tyrannies and they all still have the existing tradition of hostility toward their neighbours, which they brought with them from the hunter-gatherer times. And it's still a good tradition in the sense that you'd better be careful because otherwise they'll eat you, hair and all. So all these societies are militarized, they all fight wars — and for 5 000 years history is like that, which is bound to lead you to certain tentative conclusions about human nature.

But I think that those tentative conclusions are wrong. I think that the circumstances are sufficient explanation for why we behaved the way we have in history, without seeking an explanation going into the nature of humanity. I don't deny that we're capable of violence and many other things, but it's not all we're capable of. We are capable of many responses and they will vary according to the situation.

The basic problem so far as the shift from egalitarian hunter-gatherers to almost