Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Chapter 15: 8. There is No Justice in History

8

There is No Justice in History

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN HISTORY IN THE millennia following the Agricultural Revolution boils down to a single question: how did h
themselves in mass-cooperation networks, when they lacked the biological instincts necessary to sustain such networks? The short ans
humans created imagined orders and devised scripts. These two inventions filled the gaps left by our biological inheritance.

However, the appearance of these networks was, for many, a dubious blessing. The imagined orders sustaining these networks were
neutral nor fair. They divided people into make-believe groups, arranged in a hierarchy. The upper levels enjoyed privileges and power,
lower ones suffered from discrimination and oppression. Hammurabi's Code, for example, established a pecking order of superiors, com
slaves. Superiors got all the good things in life. Commoners got what was left. Slaves got a beating if they complained.

Despite its proclamation of the equality of all men, the imagined order established by the Americans in 1776 also established a hierar
created a hierarchy between men, who benefited from it, and women, whom it left disempowered. It created a hierarchy between whites,
enjoyed liberty, and blacks and Native Americans, who were considered humans of a lesser type and therefore did not share in the equa
men. Many of those who signed the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders. They did not release their slaves upon signing the
nor did they consider themselves hypocrites. In their view, the rights of men had little to do with Negroes.

The American order also consecrated the hierarchy between rich and poor. Most Americans at that time had little problem with the ine
caused by wealthy parents passing their money and businesses on to their children. In their view, equality meant simply that the same la
to rich and poor. It had nothing to do with unemployment benefits, integrated education or health insurance. Liberty, too, carried very diffe
connotations than it does today. In 1776, it did not mean that the disempowered (certainly not blacks or Indians or, God forbid, women) c
and exercise power. It meant simply that the state could not, except in unusual circumstances, confiscate a citizen's private property or te
to do with it. The American order thereby upheld the hierarchy of wealth, which some thought was mandated by God and others viewed
representing the immutable laws of nature. Nature, it was claimed, rewarded merit with wealth while penalising indolence.

All the above-mentioned distinctions – between free persons and slaves, between whites and blacks, between rich and poor – are roo
ctions. (The hierarchy of men and women will be discussed later.) Yet it is an iron rule of history that every imagined hierarchy disavow
origins and claims to be natural and inevitable. For instance, many people who have viewed the hierarchy of free persons and slaves as
correct have argued that slavery is not a human invention. Hammurabi saw it as ordained by the gods. Aristotle argued that slaves have
nature' whereas free people have a 'free nature'. Their status in society is merely a reflection of their innate nature.

Ask white supremacists about the racial hierarchy, and you are in for a pseudoscientific lecture concerning the biological differences between the
races. You are likely to be told that there is something in Caucasian blood or genes that makes whites naturally more intelligent, moral a
hardworking. Ask a diehard capitalist about the hierarchy of wealth, and you are likely to hear that it is the inevitable outcome of objective
differences in abilities. The rich have more money, in this view, because they are more capable and diligent. No one should be bothered
wealthy get better health care, better education and better nutrition. The rich richly deserve every perk they enjoy.

STRAND & SEE
NET BLANKES
BEACH & SEA
WHITES ONLY

21. A sign on a South African beach from the period of apartheid, restricting its use to 'whites only'. People with lighter skin colour are typically in greater danger of sunburn than people with darker skin. Yet there was no biological logic behind the division of South African beaches. Beaches reserved for people with lighter skin were not characterised by lower levels of ultraviolet radiation.

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Hindus who adhere to the caste system believe that cosmic forces have made one caste superior to another. According to a famous
creation myth, the gods fashioned the world out of the body of a primeval being, the Purusa. The sun was created from the Purusa's eye
from the Purusa's brain, the Brahmins (priests) from its mouth, the Kshatriyas (warriors) from its arms, the Vaishyas (peasants and merc
from its thighs, and the Shudras (servants) from its legs. Accept this explanation and the sociopolitical differences between Brahmins an
are as natural and eternal as the differences between the sun and the The ancient Chinese believed that when the goddess Nü Wa crea
from earth, she kneaded aristocrats from fine yellow soil, whereas commoners were formed from brown

Yet, to the best of our understanding, these hierarchies are all the product of human imagination. Brahmins and Shudras were not rea
by the gods from different body parts of a primeval being. Instead, the distinction between the two castes was created by laws and norm
by humans in northern India about 3,000 years ago. Contrary to Aristotle, there is no known biological difference between slaves and fre
Human laws and norms have turned some people into slaves and others into masters. Between blacks and whites there are some objec
biological differences, such as skin colour and hair type, but there is no evidence that the differences extend to intelligence or morality.

Most people claim that their social hierarchy is natural and just, while those of other societies are based on false and ridiculous criteri
Westerners are taught to scoff at the idea of racial hierarchy. They are shocked by laws prohibiting blacks to live in white neighbourhood
study in white schools, or to be treated in white hospitals. But the hierarchy of rich and poor – which mandates that rich people live in sep
more luxurious neighbourhoods, study in separate and more prestigious schools, and receive medical treatment in separate and better-e
facilities – seems perfectly sensible to many Americans and Europeans. Yet it's a proven fact that most rich people are rich for the simple
that they were born into a rich family, while most poor people will remain poor throughout their lives simply because they were born into
family.

Unfortunately, complex human societies seem to require imagined hierarchies and unjust discrimination. Of course not all hierarchies are
identical, and some societies suffered from more extreme types of discrimination than others, yet scholars know of no large society that
able to dispense with discrimination altogether. Time and again people have created order in their societies by classifying the population
imagined categories, such as superiors, commoners and slaves; whites and blacks; patricians and plebeians; Brahmins and Shudras; or
poor. These categories have regulated relations between millions of humans by making some people legally, politically or socially superi

Hierarchies serve an important function. They enable complete strangers to know how to treat one another without wasting the time a
needed to become personally acquainted. A car dealer needs to know immediately how much effort to put into selling vehicles to the doz
people who enter his agency every day. He can't make a detailed inquiry into the personality and wallet of each individual. Instead, he us
cues – the way the person is dressed, his or her age, and perhaps even skin and hair color. That is how the dealer immediately distingui
between the rich lawyer who may well buy an expensive luxury car, and a simple clerk who has come only to look around and dream.

Of course, differences in natural abilities also play a role in the formation of social distinctions. But such diversities of aptitudes and ch
usually mediated through imagined hierarchies. This happens in two important ways. First and foremost, most abilities have to be nurture
developed. Even if somebody is born with a particular talent, that talent will usually remain latent if it is not fostered, honed and exercised
people get the same chance to cultivate and refine their abilities. Whether or not they have such an opportunity will usually depend on the
within their society's imagined hierarchy. Consider identical twins born in China in 1700 and separated at birth. One brother is raised by
merchant family in Beijing, spending his days in school, in the market, or in upper-class social gatherings. The other twin is raised by poo
peasants in a remote village, spending his days in the muddy rice paddies. Despite having exactly the same genes, when they turn twen
unlikely to have identical skills in doing business – or in planting rice.

Second, even if people belonging to different classes develop exactly the same abilities, they are unlikely to enjoy equal success bec
have to play the game by different rules. If the peasant brother somehow developed exactly the same business acumen as his rich merc
they still would not have had the same chance of becoming rich. The economic game was rigged by legal restrictions and [illegible] glass ceilings.
When the peasant brother made his way to the Beijing market with his torn clothes, rough manners and incomprehensible dialect, he wo
have discovered that in the business world, manners and connections often speak far louder than genes.

The Vicious Circle

All societies are based on imagined hierarchies, but not necessarily on the same hierarchies. What accounts for the differences? Why di
Indian society classify people according to caste, Ottoman society according to religion, and American society according to race? In mos
hierarchy originated as the result of a set of accidental historical circumstances and was then perpetuated and refined over many genera
different groups developed vested interests in it.

For instance, many scholars surmise that the Hindu caste system took shape when Indo-Aryan people invaded the Indian subcontine
3,000 years ago, subjugating the local population. The invaders established a stratified society, in which they – of course – occupied the leading
positions (priests and warriors), leaving the natives to live as servants and slaves. The invaders, who were few in number, feared losing
privileged status and unique identity. To forestall this danger, they divided the population into castes, each of which was required to purs
occupation or perform a specific role in society. Each had different legal status, privileges and duties. Mixing of castes – social interaction, ma
even the sharing of meals – was prohibited. And the distinctions were not just legal – they became an inherent part of religious mytholog
practice.

The rulers argued that the caste system reflected an eternal cosmic reality rather than a chance historical development. Concepts of p
impurity were essential elements in Hindu religion, and they were harnessed to buttress the social pyramid. Pious Hindus were taught th
with members of a different caste could pollute not only them personally, but society as a whole, and should therefore be abhorred. Such
hardly unique to Hindus. Throughout history, and in almost all societies, concepts of pollution and purity have played a leading role in en
social and political divisions and have been exploited by numerous ruling classes to maintain their privileges. The fear of pollution is not
fabrication of priests and princes, however. It probably has its roots in biological survival mechanisms that make humans feel an instincti
towards potential disease carriers, such as sick persons and dead bodies. If you want to keep any human group isolated – women, Jews
blacks – the best way to do it is convince everyone that these people are a source of pollution.

The Hindu caste system and its attendant laws of purity became deeply embedded in Indian culture. Long after the Indo-Aryan invasi
forgotten, Indians continued to believe in the caste system and to abhor the pollution caused by caste mixing. Castes were not immune t
fact, as time went by, large castes were divided into sub-castes. Eventually the original four castes turned into 3,000 different groupings *jati*
(literally 'birth'). But this proliferation of castes did not change the basic principle of the system, according to which every person is born i
particular rank, and any infringement of its rules pollutes the person and society as a whole. A person's *jati* determines her profession, the food she
can eat, her place of residence and her eligible marriage partners. Usually a person can marry only within his or her caste, and the resul
inherit that status.

Whenever a new profession developed or a new group of people appeared on the scene, they had to be recognised as a caste in ord
a legitimate place within Hindu society. Groups that failed to win recognition as a caste were, literally, outcasts – in this stratified society they did not
even occupy the lowest rung. They became known as Untouchables. They had to live apart from all other people and scrape together a
humiliating and disgusting ways, such as sifting through garbage dumps for scrap material. Even members of the lowest caste avoided m
with them, eating with them, touching them and certainly marrying them. In modern India, matters of marriage and work are still heavily i
by the caste system, despite all attempts by the democratic government of India to break down such distinctions and convince Hindus th
nothing polluting in caste

Purity in America

A similar vicious circle perpetuated the racial hierarchy in modern America. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the European c
imported millions of African slaves to work the mines and plantations of America. They chose to import slaves from Africa rather than fro
or East Asia due to three circumstantial factors. Firstly, Africa was closer, so it was cheaper to import slaves from Senegal than from Vie

Secondly, in Africa there already existed a well-developed slave trade (exporting slaves mainly to the Middle East), whereas in Europ
very rare. It was obviously far easier to buy slaves in an existing market than to create a new one from scratch.

Thirdly, and most importantly, American plantations in places such as Virginia, Haiti and Brazil were plagued by malaria and yellow fe
had originated in Africa. Africans had acquired over the generations a partial genetic immunity to these diseases, whereas Europeans w
defenceless and died in droves. It was consequently wiser for a plantation owner to invest his money in an African slave than in a Europ
indentured labourer. Paradoxically, genetic superiority (in terms of immunity) translated into social inferiority: precisely because Africans
in tropical climates than Europeans, they ended up as the slaves of European masters! Due to these circumstantial factors, the burgeoni
societies of America were to be divided into a ruling caste of white Europeans and a subjugated caste of black Africans.

But people don't like to say that they keep slaves of a certain race or origin simply because it's economically expedient. Like the Arya
of India, white Europeans in the Americas wanted to be seen not only as economically successful but also as pious, just and objective. R
scientific myths were pressed into service to justify this division. Theologians argued that Africans descend from Ham, son of Noah, sadd
father with a curse that his offspring would be slaves. Biologists argued that blacks are less intelligent than whites and their moral sense
developed. Doctors alleged that blacks live in filth and spread diseases – in other words, they are a source of pollution.

These myths struck a chord in American culture, and in Western culture generally. They continued to exert their influence long after th
conditions that created slavery had disappeared. In the early nineteenth century imperial Britain outlawed slavery and stopped the Atlant
trade, and in the decades that followed slavery was gradually outlawed throughout the American continent. Notably, this was the first and
in history that a large number of slaveholding societies voluntarily abolished slavery. But, even though the slaves were freed, the racist m
justified slavery persisted. Separation of the races was maintained by racist legislation and social custom.

The result was a self-reinforcing cycle of cause and effect, a vicious circle. Consider, for example, the southern United States immedi
the Civil War. In 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution outlawed slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment mandated tha
citizenship and the equal protection of the law could not be denied on the basis of race. However, two centuries of slavery meant that mo
families were far poorer and far less educated than most white families. A black person born in Alabama in 1865 thus had much less cha
getting a good education and a well-paid job than did his white neighbours. His children, born in the 1880s and 1890s, started life with th
disadvantage – they, too, were born to an uneducated, poor family.

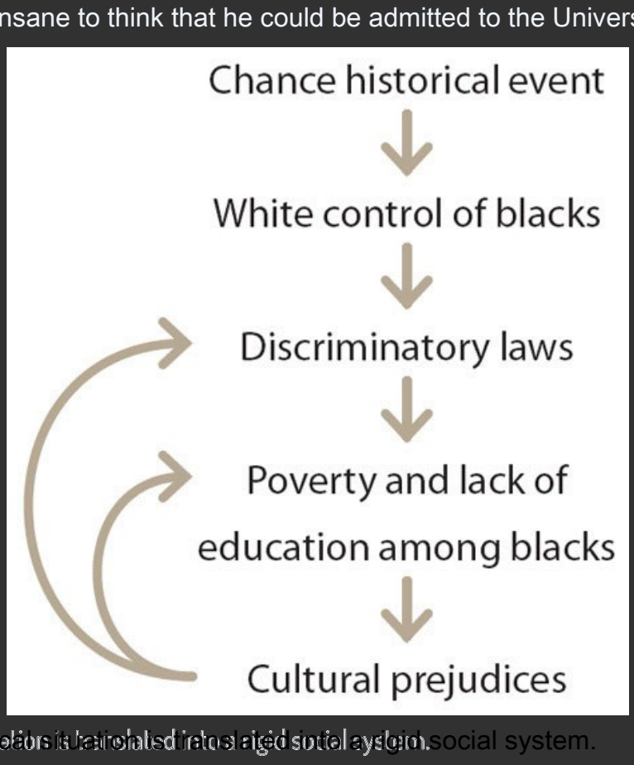
But economic disadvantage was not the whole story. Alabama was also home to many poor whites who lacked the opportunities avai
better-off racial brothers and sisters. In addition, the Industrial Revolution and the waves of immigration made the United States an extre
society, where rags could quickly turn into riches. If money was all that mattered, the sharp divide between the races should soon have b
least through intermarriage.

But that did not happen. By 1865 whites, as well as many blacks, took it to be a simple matter of fact that blacks were less intelligent,
and sexually dissolute, lazier and less concerned about personal cleanliness than whites. They were thus the agents of violence, theft, r
disease – in other words, pollution. If a black Alabaman in 1895 miraculously managed to get a good education and then applied for a re
such as a bank teller, his odds of being accepted were far worse than those of an equally qualified white candidate. The stigma that labelled blacks
as, by nature, unreliable, lazy and less intelligent conspired against him.

You might think that people would gradually understand that these stigmas were myth rather than fact and that blacks would be able,
to prove themselves just as competent, law-abiding and clean as whites. In fact, the opposite happened – these prejudices became more
entrenched as time went by. Since all the best jobs were held by whites, it became easier to believe that blacks really are inferior. 'Look,
average white citizen, 'blacks have been free for generations, yet there are almost no black professors, lawyers, doctors or even bank te
that proof that blacks are simply less intelligent and hard-working?' Trapped in this vicious circle, blacks were not hired for white-collar jo
they were deemed unintelligent, and the proof of their inferiority was the paucity of blacks in white-collar jobs.

The vicious circle did not stop there. As anti-black stigmas grew stronger, they were translated into a system of 'Jim Crow' laws and n
were meant to safeguard the racial order in the South. Blacks were forbidden to vote in elections, to study in white schools, to buy in whi
eat in white restaurants, to sleep in white hotels. The justification for all of this was that blacks were foul, slothful and vicious, so whites had to be
protected from them. Whites did not want to sleep in the same hotel as blacks or to eat in the same restaurant, for fear of diseases. They
want their children learning in the same school as black children, for fear of brutality and bad influences. They did not want blacks voting
elections, since blacks were ignorant and immoral. These fears were substantiated by scientific studies that 'proved' that blacks were indeed less
educated, that various diseases were more common among them, and that their crime rate was far higher (the studies ignored the fact th
'facts' resulted from discrimination against blacks).

By the mid-twentieth century, segregation in the former Confederate states was probably worse than in the late nineteenth century. C
King, a black student who applied to the University of Mississippi in 1958, was forcefully committed to a mental asylum. The presiding ju
that a black person must surely be insane to think that he could be admitted to the University of Mississippi.



The vicious circle: a chance historical situation is translated into a rigid social system.

Nothing was as revolting to American southerners (and many northerners) as sexual relations and marriage between black men and
women. Sex between the races became the greatest taboo and any violation, or suspected violation, was viewed as deserving immediat
summary punishment in the form of lynching. The Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist secret society, perpetrated many such killings. The
have taught the Hindu Brahmins a thing or two about purity laws.

With time, the racism spread to more and more cultural arenas. American aesthetic culture was built around white standards of beaut
physical attributes of the white race – for example light skin, fair and straight hair, a small upturned nose – came to be identified as beautiful. Typical
black features – dark skin, dark and bushy hair, a flattened nose – were deemed ugly. These preconceptions ingrained the imagined hiera
even deeper level of human consciousness.

Such vicious circles can go on for centuries and even millennia, perpetuating an imagined hierarchy that sprang from a chance histor
occurrence. Unjust discrimination often gets worse, not better, with time. Money comes to money, and poverty to poverty. Education com
education, and ignorance to ignorance. Those once victimised by history are likely to be victimised yet again. And those whom history ha
are more likely to be privileged again.

Most sociopolitical hierarchies lack a logical or biological basis – they are nothing but the perpetuation of chance events supported by
is one good reason to study history. If the division into blacks and whites or Brahmins and Shudras was grounded in biological realities –
Brahmins really had better brains than Shudras – biology would be sufficient for understanding human society. Since the biological distinctions
between different groups of *Homo sapiens* are, in fact, negligible, biology can't explain the intricacies of Indian society or American racial dyna
We can only understand those phenomena by studying the events, circumstances, and power relations that transformed figments of imag
into cruel – and very real – social structures.

He and She

Different societies adopt different kinds of imagined hierarchies. Race is very important to modern Americans but was relatively insigni
medieval Muslims. Caste was a matter of life and death in medieval India, whereas in modern Europe it is practically non-existent. One h
however, has been of supreme importance in all known human societies: the hierarchy of gender. People everywhere have divided them
men and women. And almost everywhere men have got the better deal, at least since the Agricultural Revolution.

Some of the earliest Chinese texts are oracle bones, dating to 1200 used to divine the future. On one was engraved the question: 'W
childbearing be lucky?' To which was written the reply: 'If the child is born on a *ding* day, lucky; if on a *geng* day, vastly auspicious.' However, Lady Hao
was to give birth on a *jiayin* day. The text ends with the morose observation: 'Three weeks and one day later, on day *jiayin*, the child was born. Not
lucky. It was a More than 3,000 years later, when Communist China enacted the 'one child' policy, many Chinese families continued to r
birth of a girl as a misfortune. Parents would occasionally abandon or murder newborn baby girls in order to have another shot at getting

In many societies women were simply the property of men, most often their fathers, husbands or brothers. Rape, in many legal syster
under property violation – in other words, the victim is not the woman who was raped but the male who owns her. This being the case, th
remedy was the transfer of ownership – the rapist was required to pay a bride price to the woman's father or brother, upon which she be
rapist's property. The Bible decrees that 'If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are foun
man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife' (Deuteronomy 22:28–9).
ancient Hebrews considered this a reasonable arrangement.

Raping a woman who did not belong to any man was not considered a crime at all, just as picking up a lost coin on a busy street is no
theft. And if a husband raped his own wife, he had committed no crime. In fact, the idea that a husband could rape his wife was an oxym
a husband was to have full control of your wife's sexuality. To say that a husband 'raped' his wife was as illogical as saying that a man s
wallet. Such thinking was not confined to the ancient Middle East. As of 2006, there were still fifty-three countries where a husband could
prosecuted for the rape of his wife. Even in Germany, rape laws were amended only in 1997 to create a legal category of marital

Is the division into men and women a product of the imagination, like the caste system in India and the racial system in America, or is it a
division with deep biological roots? And if it is indeed a natural division, are there also biological explanations for the preference given to
women?

Some of the cultural, legal and political disparities between men and women reflect the obvious biological differences between the sex
Childbearing has always been women's job, because men don't have wombs. Yet around this hard universal kernel, every society accum
upon layer of cultural ideas and norms that have little to do with biology. Societies associate a host of attributes with masculinity and fem
for the most part, lack a firm biological basis.

For instance, in democratic Athens of the fifth century an individual possessing a womb had no independent legal status and was forbi
participate in popular assemblies or to be a judge. With few exceptions, such an individual could not benefit from a good education, nor e
business or in philosophical discourse. None of Athens' political leaders, none of its great philosophers, orators, artists or merchants had
Does having a womb make a person unfit, biologically, for these professions? The ancient Athenians thought so. Modern Athenians disa
present-day Athens, women vote, are elected to public office, make speeches, design everything from jewellery to buildings to software, and go t
university. Their wombs do not keep them from doing any of these things as successfully as men do. True, they are still under-represent
and business – only about 12 per cent of the members of Greece's parliament are women. But there is no legal barrier to their participati
politics, and most modern Greeks think it is quite normal for a woman to serve in public office.

Many modern Greeks also think that an integral part of being a man is being sexually attracted to women only, and having sexual rela
exclusively with the opposite sex. They don't see this as a cultural bias, but rather as a biological reality – relations between two people o
opposite sex are natural, and between two people of the same sex unnatural. In fact, though, Mother Nature does not mind if men are se
attracted to one another. It's only human mothers and fathers steeped in particular cultures who make a scene if their son has a fling with
next door. The mother's tantrums are not a biological imperative. A significant number of human cultures have viewed homosexual relations as not
only legitimate but even socially constructive, ancient Greece being the most notable example. The *Iliad* does not mention that Thetis had any
objection to her son Achilles' relations with Patroclus. Queen Olympias of Macedon was one of the most temperamental and forceful wo
ancient world, and even had her own husband, King Philip, assassinated. Yet she didn't have a fit when her son, Alexander the Great, bro
lover Hephaestion home for dinner.

How can we distinguish what is biologically determined from what people merely try to justify through biological myths? A good rule o
'Biology enables, Culture forbids.' Biology is willing to tolerate a very wide spectrum of possibilities. It's culture that obliges people to rea
possibilities while forbidding others. Biology enables women to have children – some cultures oblige women to realise this possibility. Bio
enables men to enjoy sex with one another – some cultures forbid them to realise this possibility.

Culture tends to argue that it forbids only that which is unnatural. But from a biological perspective, nothing is unnatural. Whatever is
by definition also natural. A truly unnatural behaviour, one that goes against the laws of nature, simply cannot exist, so it would need no p
No culture has ever bothered to forbid men to photosynthesise, women to run faster than the speed of light, or negatively charged electr
attracted to each other.

In truth, our concepts 'natural' and 'unnatural' are taken not from biology, but from Christian theology. The theological meaning of 'nat
accordance with the intentions of the God who created nature'. Christian theologians argued that God created the human body, intendin
and organ to serve a particular purpose. If we use our limbs and organs for the purpose envisioned by God, then it is a natural activity. T
differently than God intends is unnatural. But evolution has no purpose. Organs have not evolved with a purpose, and the way they are u
constant flux. There is not a single organ in the human body that only does the job its prototype did when it first appeared hundreds of milli
years ago. Organs evolve to perform a particular function, but once they exist, they can be adapted for other usages as well. Mouths, for
appeared because the earliest multicellular organisms needed a way to take nutrients into their bodies. We still use our mouths for that p
but we also use them to kiss, speak and, if we are Rambo, to pull the pins out of hand grenades. Are any of these uses unnatural simply
worm-like ancestors 600 million years ago didn't do those things with their mouths?

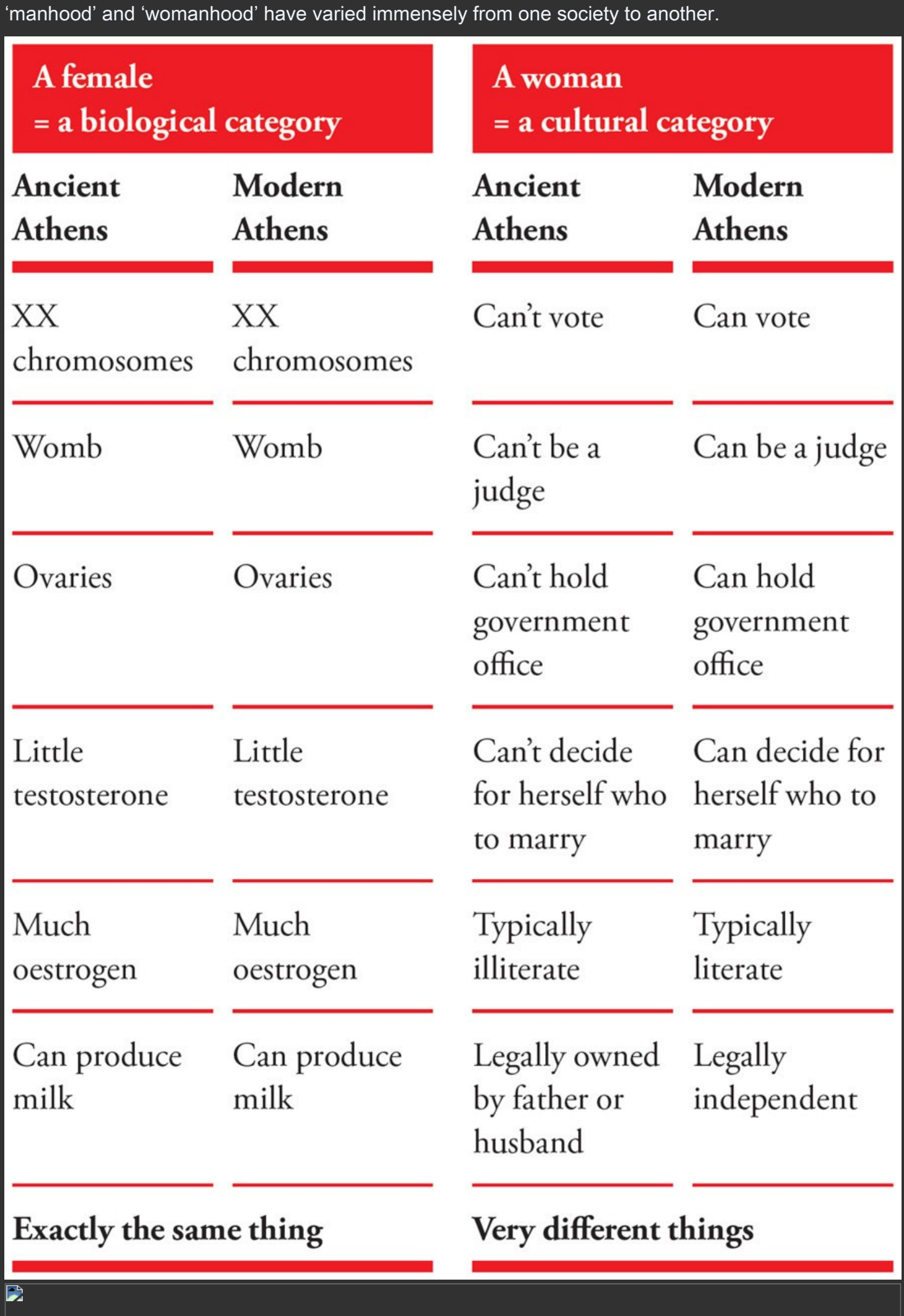
Similarly, wings didn't suddenly appear in all their aerodynamic glory. They developed from organs that served another purpose. Acc
theory, insect wings evolved millions of years ago from body protrusions on flightless bugs. Bugs with bumps had a larger surface area th
without bumps, and this enabled them to absorb more sunlight and thus stay warmer. In a slow evolutionary process, these solar heaters
larger. The same structure that was good for maximum sunlight absorption – lots of surface area, little weight – also, by coincidence, gav
insects a bit of a lift when they skipped and jumped. Those with bigger protrusions could skip and jump farther. Some insects started usi
things to glide, and from there it was a small step to wings that could actually propel the bug through the air. Next time a mosquito buzze
ear, accuse her of unnatural behaviour. If she were well behaved and content with what God gave her, she'd use her wings only as sola

The same sort of multitasking applies to our sexual organs and behaviour. Sex first evolved for procreation and courtship rituals as a w
up the fitness of a potential mate. But many animals now put both to use for a multitude of social purposes that have little to do with creat
copies of themselves. Chimpanzees, for example, use sex to cement political alliances, establish intimacy and defuse tensions. Is that u

Sex and Gender

There is little sense, then, in arguing that the natural function of women is to give birth, or that homosexuality is unnatural. Most of the la
rights and obligations that define manhood and womanhood reflect human imagination more than biological reality.

Biologically, humans are divided into males and females. A male *Homo sapiens* is one who has one X chromosome and one Y chromosome; a female
Homo sapiens has two Xs. But 'man' and 'woman' name social, not biological, categories. While in the great majority of cases in most human so
are males and women are females, the social terms carry a lot of baggage that has only a tenuous, if any, relationship to the biological te
is not a Sapiens with particular biological qualities such as XY chromosomes, testicles and lots of testosterone. Rather, he fits into a partic
his society's imagined human order. His culture's myths assign him particular masculine roles (like engaging in politics), rights (like votin
duties (like military service). Likewise, a woman is not a Sapiens with two X chromosomes, a womb and plenty of oestrogen. Rather, she
member of an imagined human order. The myths of her society assign her unique feminine roles (raising children), rights (protection aga
violence) and duties (obedience to her husband). Since myths, rather than biology, define the roles, rights and duties of men and women
meaning of 'manhood' and 'womanhood' have varied immensely from one society to another.



A female = a biological category	
Ancient Athens	**Modern Athens**
XX chromosomes	XX chromosomes
Womb	Womb
Ovaries	Ovaries
Little testosterone	Little testosterone
Much oestrogen	Much oestrogen
Can produce milk	Can produce milk
Exactly the same thing	

A woman = a cultural category	
Ancient Athens	**Modern Athens**
Can't vote	Can vote
Can't be a judge	Can be a judge
Can't hold government office	Can hold government office
Can't decide for herself who to marry	Can decide for herself who to marry
Typically illiterate	Typically literate
Legally owned by father or husband	Legally independent
Very different things	

22. Eighteenth-century masculinity: an official portrait of King Louis XIV of France. Note the long wig, stockings, high-heeled shoes, dancer's posture – and huge sword. In contemporary Europe, all these (except for the sword) would be considered marks of effeminacy. But in his time Louis was a European paragon of manhood and virility.

© Réunion des musées nationaux/Gérard Blot.

23. Twenty-first-century masculinity: an official portrait of Barack Obama. What happened to the wig, stockings, high heels and sword? Dominant men have never looked so dull and dreary as they do today. During most of history, dominant men have been colourful and flamboyant, such as American Indian chiefs with their feathered headdresses and Hindu maharajas decked out in silks and diamonds. Throughout the animal kingdom males tend to be more colourful and accessorised than females – think of peacocks' tails and lions' manes.

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To make things less confusing, scholars usually distinguish between 'sex', which is a biological category, and 'gender', a cultural cate
divided between males and females, and the qualities of this division are objective and have remained constant throughout history. Gend
divided between men and women (and some cultures recognise other categories). So-called 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities are inte
and undergo constant changes. For example, there are far-reaching differences in the behaviour, desires, dress and even body posture
from women in classical Athens and women in modern

Sex is child's play; but gender is serious business. To get to be a member of the male sex is the simplest thing in the world. You just n
born with an X and a Y chromosome. To get to be a female is equally simple. A pair of X chromosomes will do it. In contrast, becoming a
woman is a very complicated and demanding undertaking. Since most masculine and feminine qualities are cultural rather than biologica
society automatically crowns each male a man, or every female a woman. Nor are these titles laurels that can be rested on once they ar
Males must prove their masculinity constantly, throughout their lives, from cradle to grave, in an endless series of rites and performances
woman's work is never done – she must continually convince herself and others that she is feminine enough.

Success is not guaranteed. Males in particular live in constant dread of losing their claim to manhood. Throughout history, males have
to risk and even sacrifice their lives, just so that people will say 'He's a real man!'

What's So Good About Men?

At least since the Agricultural Revolution, most human societies have been patriarchal societies that valued men more highly than wome
matter how a society defined 'man' and 'woman', to be a man was always better. Patriarchal societies educate men to think and act in a m
way and women to think and act in a feminine way, punishing anyone who dares cross those boundaries. Yet they do not equally reward
conform. Qualities considered masculine are more valued than those considered feminine, and members of a society who personify the
ideal get less than those who exemplify the masculine ideal. Fewer resources are invested in the health and education of women; they h
economic opportunities, less political power, and less freedom of movement. Gender is a race in which some of the runners compete on
bronze medal.

True, a handful of women have made it to the alpha position, such as Cleopatra of Egypt, Empress Wu Zetian of China AD 700) and
England. Yet they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Throughout Elizabeth's forty-five-year reign, all Members of Parliament were me
officers in the Royal Navy and army were men, all judges and lawyers were men, all bishops and archbishops were men, all theologians
were men, all doctors and surgeons were men, all students and professors in all universities and colleges were men, all mayors and she
men, and almost all the writers, architects, poets, philosophers, painters, musicians and scientists were men.

Patriarchy has been the norm in almost all agricultural and industrial societies. It has tenaciously weathered political upheavals, socia
and economic transformations. Egypt, for example, was conquered numerous times over the centuries. Assyrians, Persians, Macedonia
Arabs, Mameluks, Turks and British occupied it – and its society always remained patriarchal. Egypt was governed by pharaonic law, Gr
Roman law, Muslim law, Ottoman law and British law – and they all discriminated against people who were not 'real men'.

Since patriarchy is so universal, it cannot be the product of some vicious circle that was kick-started by a chance occurrence. It is par
noteworthy that even before 1492, most societies in both America and Afro-Asia were patriarchal, even though they had been out of con
thousands of years. If patriarchy in Afro-Asia resulted from some chance occurrence, why were the Aztecs and Incas patriarchal? It is fa
that even though the precise definition of 'man' and 'woman' varies between cultures, there is some universal biological reason why almo
cultures valued manhood over womanhood. We do not know what this reason is. There are plenty of theories, none of them convincing.

Muscle Power

The most common theory points to the fact that men are stronger than women, and that they have used their greater physical power to f
women into submission. A more subtle version of this claim argues that their strength allows men to monopolise tasks that demand hard
labour, such as ploughing and harvesting. This gives them control of food production, which in turn translates into political clout.

There are two problems with this emphasis on muscle power. First, the statement that 'men are stronger than women' is true only on
and only with regard to certain types of strength. Women are generally more resistant to hunger, disease and fatigue than men. There ar
women who can run faster and lift heavier weights than many men. Furthermore, and most problematically for this theory, women have,
throughout history, been excluded mainly from jobs that require little physical effort (such as the priesthood, law and politics), while enga
hard manual labour in the fields, in crafts and in the household. If social power were divided in direct relation to physical strength or stami
women should have got far more of it.

Even more importantly, there simply is no direct relation between physical strength and social power among humans. People in their
usually exercise power over people in their twenties, even though twentysomethings are much stronger than their elders. The typical pla
owner in Alabama in the mid-nineteenth century could have been wrestled to the ground in seconds by any of the slaves cultivating his c
fields. Boxing matches were not used to select Egyptian pharaohs or Catholic popes. In forager societies, political dominance generally r
the person possessing the best social skills rather than the most developed musculature. In organised crime, the big boss is not necessa
strongest man. He is often an older man who very rarely uses his own fists; he gets younger and fitter men to do the dirty jobs for him. A gu
thinks that the way to take over the syndicate is to beat up the don is unlikely to live long enough to learn from his mistake. Even among
chimpanzees, the alpha male wins his position by building a stable coalition with other males and females, not through mindless violence

In fact, human history shows that there is often an inverse relation between physical prowess and social power. In most societies, it's
classes who do the manual labour. This may reflect *Homo sapiens*' position in the food chain. If all that counted were raw physical abilities, Sapiens would
have found themselves on a middle rung of the ladder. But their mental and social skills placed them at the top. It is therefore only natura
chain of power within the species will also be determined by mental and social abilities more than by brute force. Consequently it sounds
improbable that the most influential and most stable social hierarchy in history is founded on men's ability physically to coerce women.

The Scum of Society

Another theory explains that masculine dominance results not from strength but from aggression. Millions of years of evolution have mad
more violent than women. Women can match men as far as hatred, greed and abuse are concerned, but when push comes to shove, th
goes, men are more willing to engage in raw physical violence. This is why throughout history warfare has been a masculine prerogative

In times of war, men's control of the armed forces has made them the masters of civilian society, too. They then used their control of
society to fight more and more wars, and the greater the number of wars, the greater men's control of society. This feedback loop explain
ubiquity of war and the ubiquity of patriarchy.

Recent studies of the hormonal and cognitive systems of men and women strengthen the assumption that men indeed have more ag
and violent tendencies, and are therefore, on average, better suited to serve as common soldiers. Yet granted that the common soldiers
does it follow that the ones managing the war and enjoying its fruits must also be men? That makes no sense. It's like assuming that bec
slaves cultivating cotton fields are black, plantation owners will be black as well. Just as an all-black workforce might be controlled by an a
management, why couldn't an all-male soldiery be controlled by an all-female or at least partly female government? In fact, in numerous
throughout history, the top officers did not work their way up from the rank of private. Aristocrats, the wealthy and the educated were automa
assigned officer rank and never served as common soldiers.

When the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon's nemesis, enlisted in the British army at the age of eighteen, he was immediately commissio
officer. He didn't think much of the plebeians under his command. 'We have in the service the scum of the earth as common soldiers,' he
fellow aristocrat during the wars against France. These common soldiers were usually recruited from among the very poorest, or from et
minorities (such as the Irish Catholics). Their chances of ascending the military ranks were negligible. The senior ranks were reserved fo
princes and kings. But why only for dukes, and not for duchesses?

The French Empire in Africa was established and defended by the sweat and blood of Senegalese, Algerians and working-class Fren
percentage of well-born Frenchmen within the ranks was negligible. Yet the percentage of well-born Frenchmen within the small elite tha
French army, ruled the empire and enjoyed its fruits was very high. Why just Frenchmen, and not French women?

In China there was a long tradition of subjugating the army to the civilian bureaucracy, so mandarins who had never held a sword ofte
wars. 'You do not waste good iron to make nails,' went a common Chinese saying, meaning that really talented people join the civil bure
the army. Why, then, were all of these mandarins men?

One can't reasonably argue that their physical weakness or low testosterone levels prevented women from being successful mandari
and politicians. In order to manage a war, you surely need stamina, but not much physical strength or aggressiveness. Wars are not a pu
They are very complex projects that require an extraordinary degree of organisation, cooperation and appeasement. The ability to maint
home, acquire allies abroad, and understand what goes through the minds of other people (particularly your enemies) is usually the key
Hence an aggressive brute is often the worst choice to run a war. Much better is a cooperative person who knows how to appease, how
manipulate and how to see things from different perspectives. This is the stuff empire-builders are made of. The militarily incompetent Au
succeeded in establishing a stable imperial regime, achieving something that eluded both Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, who w
better generals. Both his admiring contemporaries and modern historians often attribute this feat to his virtues of mildness and
clemency.

Women are often stereotyped as better manipulators and appeasers than men, and are famed for their superior ability to see things f
perspective of others. If there's any truth in these stereotypes, then women should have made excellent politicians and empire-builders,
dirty work on the battlefields to testosterone-charged but simple-minded machos. Popular myths notwithstanding, this rarely happened in
world. It is not at all clear why not.

Patriarchal Genes

A third type of biological explanation gives less importance to brute force and violence, and suggests that through millions of years of ev
men and women evolved different survival and reproduction strategies. As men competed against each other for the opportunity to impre
fertile women, an individual's chances of reproduction depended above all on his ability to outperform and defeat other men. As time we
masculine genes that made it to the next generation were those belonging to the most ambitious, aggressive and competitive men.

A woman, on the other hand, had no problem finding a man willing to impregnate her. However, if she wanted her children to provide h
grandchildren, she needed to carry them in her womb for nine arduous months, and then nurture them for years. During that time she ha
opportunities to obtain food, and required a lot of help. She needed a man. In order to ensure her own survival and the survival of her ch
woman had little choice but to agree to whatever conditions the man stipulated so that he would stick around and share some of the burd
time went by, the feminine genes that made it to the next generation belonged to women who were submissive caretakers. Women who
much time fighting for power did not leave any of those powerful genes for future generations.

The result of these different survival strategies – so the theory goes – is that men have been programmed to be ambitious and compe
to excel in politics and business, whereas women have tended to move out of the way and dedicate their lives to raising children.

But this approach also seems to be belied by the empirical evidence. Particularly problematic is the assumption that women's depend
external help made them dependent on men, rather than on other women, and that male competitiveness made men socially dominant.
many species of animals, such as elephants and bonobo chimpanzees, in which the dynamics between dependent females and compet
results in a matriarchal society. Since females need external help, they are obliged to develop their social skills and learn how to cooperate
appease. They construct all-female social networks that help each member raise her children. Males, meanwhile, spend their time fighting
competing. Their social skills and social bonds remain underdeveloped. Bonobo and elephant societies are controlled by strong network
cooperative females, while the self-centred and uncooperative males are pushed to the sidelines. Though bonobo females are weaker o
than the males, the females often gang up to beat males who overstep their limits.

If this is possible among bonobos and elephants, why not among *Homo sapiens*? Sapiens are relatively weak animals, whose advantage rests in their abili
to cooperate in large numbers. If so, we should expect that dependent women, even if they are dependent on men, would use their supe
skills to cooperate among themselves, while outmaneuvering and manipulating the aggressive, autonomous and self-centred men.

How did it happen that in the one species whose success depends above all on cooperation, individuals who are supposedly less coo
(men) control individuals who are supposedly more cooperative (women)? At present, we have no good answer. Maybe the common ass
are just wrong. Maybe males of the species *Homo sapiens* are characterised not by physical strength, aggressiveness and competitiveness, but
rather by superior social skills and a greater tendency to cooperate. We just don't know.

What we do know, however, is that during the last century gender roles have undergone a tremendous revolution. More and more so
not only give men and women equal legal status, political rights and economic opportunities, but also completely rethink their most basic
conceptions of gender and sexuality. Though the gender gap is still significant, events have been moving at a breathtaking speed. At the beginning
of the twentieth century the idea of giving voting rights to women was generally seen in the USA as outrageous; the prospect of a female
secretary or Supreme Court justice was simply ridiculous; whereas homosexuality was such a taboo subject that it could not even be ope
discussed. At the beginning of the twenty-first century women's voting rights are taken for granted; female cabinet secretaries are hardly a
for comment; and in 2013 five US Supreme Court justices, three of them women, decided in favour of legalising same-sex marriages (ove
objections of four male justices).

These dramatic changes are precisely what makes the history of gender so bewildering. If, as is being demonstrated today so clearly
patriarchal system has been based on unfounded myths rather than on biological facts, what accounts for the universality and stability of
system?