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David Graeber
The Bully's Pulpit
On the Elementary Structure of Domination
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On the Elementary Structure of Domination

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victim: we equate aggressors and victims, insist that everyone is equally guilty (notice how, whenever one hears a report of an atrocity, some will immediately start insisting that the victims must have committed atrocities too), and just hope that by doing so, the contagion will not spread to us.

This is difficult stuff. I don't claim to understand it completely. But if we are ever going to move toward a genuinely free society, then we're going to have to recognize how the triangular and mutually constitutive relationship of bully, victim, and audience really works, and then develop ways to combat it. Remember, the situation isn't hopeless. If it were not possible to create structures—habits, sensibilities, forms of common wisdom—that do sometimes prevent the dynamic from clicking in, then egalitarian societies of any sort would never have been possible. Remember, too, how little courage is usually required to thwart bullies who are not backed up by any sort of institutional power. Most of all, remember that when the bullies really are backed up by such power, the heroes may be those who simply run away.

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Nob: See what I mean? Calm down! I said you were a decent chap. And such language! Don't you realize there are ladies present?

And what is true of social class is also true of any other form of structural inequality: hence epithets such as "shrill women," "angry black men," and an endless variety of similar terms of dismissive contempt. But the essential logic of bullying is prior to such inequalities. It is the ur-stuff of which they are made.

Stop Hitting Yourself

And this, I propose, is the critical human flaw. It's not that as a species we're particularly aggressive. It's that we tend to respond to aggression very poorly. Our first instinct when we observe unprovoked aggression is either to pretend it isn't happening or, if that becomes impossible, to equate attacker and victim, placing both under a kind of contagion, which, it is hoped, can be prevented from spreading to everybody else. (Hence, the psychologists' finding that bullies and victims tend to be about equally disliked.) The feeling of guilt caused by the suspicion that this is a fundamentally cowardly way to behave—since it is a fundamentally cowardly way to behave—opens up a complex play of projections, in which the bully is seen simultaneously as an unconquerable super-villain and a pitiable, insecure blowhard, while the victim becomes both an aggressor (a violator of whatever social conventions the bully has invoked or invented) and a pathetic coward unwilling to defend himself.

Obviously, I am offering only the most minimal sketch of complex psychodynamics. But even so, these insights may help us understand why we find it so difficult to extend our sympathies to, among others, fleeing Iraqi conscripts gunned down in "turkey shoots" by U.S. warriors. We apply the same logic we did when passively watching some childhood bully terrorizing his flailing

lations) learn to choose their victims according to adult standards. At first, the principal criterion is how the victim reacts. The ideal victim is not absolutely passive. No, the ideal victim is one who fights back in some way but does so ineffectively, by flailing about, say, or screaming or crying, threatening to tell their mother, pretending they're going to fight and then trying to run away. Doing so is precisely what makes it possible to create a moral drama in which the audience can tell itself the bully must be, in some sense, in the right.

This triangular dynamic among bully, victim, and audience is what I mean by the deep structure of bullying. It deserves to be analyzed in the textbooks. Actually, it deserves to be set in giant neon letters everywhere: Bullying creates a moral drama in which the manner of the victim's reaction to an act of aggression can be used as retrospective justification for the original act of aggression itself.

Not only does this drama appear at the very origins of bullying in early childhood; it is precisely the aspect that endures in adult life. I call it the "you two cut it out" fallacy. Anyone who frequents social media forums will recognize the pattern. Aggressor attacks. Target tries to rise above and do nothing. No one intervenes. Aggressor ramps up attack. Target tries to rise above and do nothing. No one intervenes. Aggressor further ramps up attack.

This can happen a dozen, fifty times, until finally, the target answers back. Then, and only then, a dozen voices immediately sound, crying "Fight! Fight! Look at those two idiots going at it!" or "Can't you two just calm down and learn to see the other's point of view?" The clever bully knows that this will happen—and that he will forfeit no points for being the aggressor. He also knows that if he tempers his aggression to just the right pitch, the victim's response can itself be represented as the problem.

Nob: You're a decent chap, Jeeves, but I must say, you're a bit of an imbecile.

Jeeves: A bit of a . . . what!? What the hell do you mean by that?

In February and early March 1991, during the first Gulf War, U.S. forces bombed, shelled, and otherwise set fire to thousands of young Iraqi men who were trying to flee Kuwait. There were a series of such incidents—the "Highway of Death," "Highway 8," the "Battle of Rumaila"—in which U.S. air power cut off columns of retreating Iraqis and engaged in what the military refers to as a "turkey shoot," where trapped soldiers are simply slaughtered in their vehicles. Images of charred bodies trying desperately to crawl from their trucks became iconic symbols of the war.

I have never understood why this mass slaughter of Iraqi men isn't considered a war crime. It's clear that, at the time, the U.S. command feared it might be. President George H.W. Bush quickly announced a temporary cessation of hostilities, and the military has deployed enormous efforts since then to minimize the casualty count, obscure the circumstances, defame the victims ("a bunch of rapists, murderers, and thugs," General Norman Schwarzkopf later insisted), and prevent the most graphic images from appearing on U.S. television. It's rumored that there are videos from cameras mounted on helicopter gunships of panicked Iraqis, which will never be released.

It makes sense that the elites were worried. These were, after all, mostly young men who'd been drafted and who, when thrown into combat, made precisely the decision one would wish all young men in such a situation would make: saying to hell with this, packing up their things, and going home. For this, they should be burned alive? When ISIS burned a Jordanian pilot alive last winter, it was universally denounced as unspeakably barbaric—which it was, of course. Still, ISIS at least could point out that the pilot had been dropping bombs on them. The retreating Iraqis on the "Highway of Death" and other main drags of American carnage were just kids who didn't want to fight.

But maybe it was this very refusal that's prevented the Iraqi soldiers from garnering more sympathy, not only in elite circles, where you wouldn't expect much, but also in the court of public

opinion. On some level, let's face it: these men were cowards. They got what they deserved.

There seems, indeed, a decided lack of sympathy for noncombatant men in war zones. Even reports by international human rights organizations speak of massacres as being directed almost exclusively against women, children, and, perhaps, the elderly. The implication, almost never stated outright, is that adult males are either combatants or have something wrong with them. ("You mean to say there were people out there slaughtering women and children and you weren't out there defending them? What are you? Chicken?") Those who carry out massacres have been known to cynically manipulate this tacit conscription: most famously, the Bosnian Serb commanders who calculated they could avoid charges of genocide if, instead of exterminating the entire population of conquered towns and villages, they merely exterminated all males between ages fifteen and fifty-five.

But there is something more at work in circumscribing our empathy for the fleeing Iraqi massacre victims. U.S. news consumers were bombarded with accusations that they were actually a bunch of criminals who'd been personally raping and pillaging and tossing newborn babies out of incubators (unlike that Jordanian pilot, who'd merely been dropping bombs on cities full of women and children from a safe, or so he thought, altitude). We are all taught that bullies are really cowards, so we easily accept that the reverse must naturally be true as well. For most of us, the primordial experience of bullying and being bullied lurks in the background whenever crimes and atrocities are discussed. It shapes our sensibilities and our capacities for empathy in deep and pernicious ways.

Cowardice Is a Cause Too

Most people dislike wars and feel the world would be a better place without them. Yet contempt for cowardice seems to move

authority may be bad, openly pointing out that someone is abusing authority is much worse—and merits the severest punishment.

A second surprising finding from recent research: bullies do not, in fact, suffer from low self-esteem. Psychologists had long assumed that mean kids were taking out their insecurities on others. No. It turns out that most bullies act like self-satisfied little pricks not because they are tortured by self-doubt, but because they actually are self-satisfied little pricks. Indeed, such is their self-assurance that they create a moral universe in which their swagger and violence becomes the standard by which all others are to be judged; weakness, clumsiness, absentmindedness, or self-righteous whining are not just sins, but provocations that would be wrong to leave unaddressed.

Here, too, I can offer personal testimony. I keenly remember a conversation with a jock I knew in high school. He was a lunk, but a good-natured one. I think we'd even gotten stoned together once or twice. One day, after rehearsing some costume drama, I thought it would be fun to walk into the dorm in Renaissance garb. As soon as he saw me, he pounced as if about to pulverize. I was so indignant I forgot to be terrified. "Matt! What the hell are you doing? Why would you want to attack me?" Matt seemed so taken aback that he forgot to continue menacing me. "But . . . you came into the dorm wearing tights!" he protested. "I mean, what did you expect?" Was Matt enacting deep-seated insecurities about his own sexuality? I don't know. Probably so. But the real question is, why do we assume his troubled mind is so important? What really matters was that he genuinely felt he was defending a social code.

In this instance, the adolescent bully was deploying violence to enforce a code of homophobic masculinity that underpins adult authority as well. But with smaller children, this is often not the case. Here we come to a third surprising finding of the psychological literature—maybe the most telling of all. At first, it's not actually the fat girl, or the boy with glasses, who is most likely to be targeted. That comes later, as bullies (ever cognizant of power re-

this is not true. Studies also show that in general, if one or two onlookers object, then bullies back off. Yet somehow most onlookers are convinced the opposite will happen. Why?

For one thing, because nearly every genre of popular fiction they are likely to be exposed to tells them it will. Comic book superheroes routinely step in to say, "Hey, stop beating on that kid"—and invariably the culprit does indeed turn his wrath on them, resulting in all sorts of mayhem. (If there is a covert message in such fiction, it is surely along the lines of: "You had better not get involved in such matters unless you are capable of taking on some monster from another dimension who can shoot lightning from its eyes.") The "hero," as deployed in the U.S. media, is largely an alibi for passivity. This first occurred to me when watching a small-town TV newscaster praising some teenager who'd jumped into a river to save a drowning child. "When I asked him why he did it," the newscaster remarked, "he said what true heroes always say, 'I just did what anyone would do under the circumstances.'" The audience is supposed to understand that, of course, this isn't true. Anyone would not do that. And that's okay. Heroes are extraordinary. It's perfectly acceptable under the same circumstances for you to just stand there and wait for a professional rescue team.

It's also possible that audiences of grade schoolers react passively to bullying because they have caught on to how adult authority operates and mistakenly assume the same logic applies to interactions with their peers. If it is, say, a police officer who is pushing around some hapless adult, then yes, it is absolutely true that intervening is likely to land you in serious trouble—quite possibly, at the wrong end of a club. And we all know what happens to "whistleblowers." (Remember Secretary of State John Kerry calling on Edward Snowden to "man up" and submit himself to a lifetime of sadistic bullying at the hands of the U.S. criminal justice system? What is an innocent child supposed to make of this?) The fates of the Mannings or Snowdens of the world are high-profile advertisements for a cardinal principle of American culture: while abusing

them on a far deeper level. After all, desertion—the tendency of conscripts called up for their first experience of military glory to duck out of the line of march and hide in the nearest forest, gulch, or empty farmhouse and then, when the column has safely passed, figure out a way to return home—is probably the greatest threat to wars of conquest. Napoleon's armies, for instance, lost far more troops to desertion than to combat. Conscript armies often have to deploy a significant percentage of their conscripts behind the lines with orders to shoot any of their fellow conscripts who try to run away. Yet even those who claim to hate war often feel uncomfortable celebrating desertion.

About the only real exception I know of is Germany, which has erected a series of monuments labeled "To the Unknown Deserter." The first and most famous, in Potsdam, is inscribed: "TO A MAN WHO REFUSED TO KILL HIS FELLOW MAN." Yet even here, when I tell friends about this monument, I often encounter a sort of instinctive wince. "I guess what people will ask is: Did they really desert because they didn't want to kill others, or because they didn't want to die themselves?" As if there's something wrong with that.

In militaristic societies like the United States, it is almost axiomatic that our enemies must be cowards—especially if the enemy can be labeled a "terrorist" (i.e., someone accused of wishing to create fear in us, to turn us, of all people, into cowards). It is then necessary to ritually turn matters around and insist that no, it is they who are actually fearful. All attacks on U.S. citizens are by definition "cowardly attacks." The second George Bush was referring to the 9/11 attacks as "cowardly acts" the very next morning. On the face of it, this is odd. After all, there's no lack of bad things one can find to say about Mohammed Atta and his confederates—take your pick, really—but surely "coward" isn't one of them. Blowing up a wedding party using an unmanned drone might be considered an act of cowardice. Personally flying an airplane into a skyscraper takes guts. Nevertheless, the idea that one can be courageous in

a bad cause seems to somehow fall outside the domain of acceptable public discourse, despite the fact that much of what passes for world history consists of endless accounts of courageous people doing awful things.

On Fundamental Flaws

Sooner or later, every project for human freedom will have to comprehend why we accept societies being ranked and ordered by violence and domination to begin with. And it strikes me that our visceral reaction to weakness and cowardice, our strange reluctance to identify with even the most justifiable forms of fear, might provide a clue.

The problem is that debate so far has been dominated by proponents of two equally absurd positions. On the one side, there are those who deny that it's possible to say anything about humans as a species; on the other, there are those who assume that the goal is to explain why it is that some humans seem to take pleasure in pushing other ones around. The latter camp almost invariably ends up spinning stories about baboons and chimps, usually to introduce the proposition that humans—or at least those of us with sufficient quantities of testosterone—inherit from our primate ancestors an inbuilt tendency toward self-aggrandizing aggression that manifests itself in war, which cannot be gotten rid of, but may be diverted into competitive market activity. On the basis of these assumptions, the cowards are those who lack a fundamental biological impulse, and it's hardly surprising that we would hold them in contempt.

There are a lot of problems with this story, but the most obvious is that it simply isn't true. The prospect of going to war does not automatically set off a biological trigger in the human male. Just consider what Andrew Bard Schmookler has referred to as "the parable of the tribes." Five societies share the same river valley. They

head. I think I might have cracked his lip. In a way, it worked exactly as intended: for a month or two, bullies largely stayed away. But the immediate result was that we were both taken to the office for fighting, and the fact that he had struck first was determined to be irrelevant. I was found to be the guilty party and expelled from the school's advanced math and science club. (Since he was a C student, there was nothing, really, for him to be expelled from.)

"It doesn't matter who started it" are probably six of most insidious words in the English language. Of course it matters.

Crowdsourced Cruelty

Very little of this focus on the role of institutional authority is reflected in the psychological literature on bullying, which, being largely written for school authorities, assumes that their role is entirely benign. Still, recent research—of which there has been an outpouring since Columbine—has yielded, I think, a number of surprising revelations about the elementary forms of domination. Let's go deeper.

The first thing this research reveals is that the overwhelming majority of bullying incidents take place in front of an audience. Lonely, private persecution is relatively rare. Much of bullying is about humiliation, and the effects cannot really be produced without someone to witness them. Sometimes, onlookers actively abet the bully, laughing, goading, or joining in. More often, the audience is passively acquiescent. Only rarely does anyone step in to defend a classmate being threatened, mocked, or physically attacked.

When researchers question children on why they do not intervene, a minority say they felt the victim got what he or she deserved, but the majority say they didn't like what happened, and certainly didn't much like the bully, but decided that getting involved might mean ending up on the receiving end of the same treatment—and that would only make things worse. Interestingly,

elaborate anti-bullying programs, schoolyard bullying happens in a way that's in no sense at odds with or in spite of the school's institutional authority. Bullying is more like a refraction of its authority. To begin with an obvious point: children in school can't leave. Normally, a child's first instinct upon being tormented or humiliated by someone much larger is to go someplace else. Schoolchildren, however, don't have that option. If they try persistently to flee to safety, the authorities will bring them back. This is one reason, I suspect, for the stereotype of the bully as teacher's pet or hall monitor: even when it's not true, it draws on the tacit knowledge that the bully does depend on the authority of the institution in at least that one way—the school is, effectively, holding the victims in place while their tormentors hit them. This dependency on authority is also why the most extreme and elaborate forms of bullying take place in prisons, where dominant inmates and prison guards fall into alliances.

Even more, bullies are usually aware that the system is likely to punish any victim who strikes back more harshly. Just as a woman, confronted by an abusive man who may well be twice her size, cannot afford to engage in a "fair fight," but must seize the opportune moment to inflict as much as damage as possible on the man who's been abusing her—since she cannot leave him in a position to retaliate—so too must the schoolyard bullying victim respond with disproportionate force, not to disable the opponent, in this case, but to deliver a blow so decisive that it makes the antagonist hesitate to engage again.

I learned this lesson firsthand. I was scrawny in grade school, younger than my peers—I'd skipped a grade—and thus a prime target for some of the bigger kids who seemed to have developed a quasi-scientific technique of jabbing runts like me sharp, hard, and quick enough to avoid being accused of "fighting." Hardly a day went by that I was not attacked. Finally, I decided enough was enough, found my moment, and sent one particularly noxious galoot sprawling across the corridor with a well-placed blow to the

can all live in peace only if every one of them remains peaceful. The moment one "bad apple" is introduced—say, the young men in one tribe decide that an appropriate way of handling the loss of a loved one is to go bring back some foreigner's head, or that their God has chosen them to be the scourge of unbelievers—well, the other tribes, if they don't want to be exterminated, have only three options: flee, submit, or reorganize their own societies around effectiveness in war. The logic seems hard to fault. Nevertheless, as anyone familiar with the history of, say, Oceania, Amazonia, or Africa would be aware, a great many societies simply refused to organize themselves on military lines. Again and again, we encounter descriptions of relatively peaceful communities who just accepted that every few years, they'd have to take to the hills as some raiding party of local bad boys arrived to torch their villages, rape, pillage, and carry off trophy parts from hapless stragglers. The vast majority of human males have refused to spend their time training for war, even when it was in their immediate practical interest to do so. To me, this is proof positive that human beings are not a particularly bellicose species.[1]

[1] Still, before we let adult males entirely off the hook, I should observe that the argument for military efficiency cuts two ways: even those societies whose men refuse to organize themselves effectively for war also do, in the overwhelming majority of cases, insist that women should not fight at all. This is hardly very efficient. Even if one were to concede that men are, generally speaking, better at fighting (and this is by no means clear; it depends on the type of fighting), and one were to simply choose the most able-bodied half of any given population, then some of them would be female. Anyway, in a truly desperate situation it can be suicidal not to employ every hand you've got. Nonetheless, again and again we find men—even those relatively nonbelligerent ones—deciding they would rather die than break the code saying women should never be allowed to handle weapons. No wonder we find it so difficult to sympathize with male atrocity victims: they are, to the degree that they segregate women from combat, complicit in the logic of male violence that destroyed them. But if we are trying to identify that key flaw or set of flaws in human nature that allows for that logic of male violence to exist to begin with, it leaves us with a confusing picture. We do not, perhaps, have some sort of inbuilt proclivity for violent domination. But

No one would deny, of course, that humans are flawed creatures. Just about every human language has some analogue of the English "humane" or expressions like "to treat someone like a human being," implying that simply recognizing another creature as a fellow human entails a responsibility to treat them with a certain minimum of kindness, consideration, and respect. It is obvious, however, that nowhere do humans consistently live up to that responsibility. And when we fail, we shrug and say we're "only human." To be human, then, is both to have ideals and to fail to live up to them.

If this is how humans tend to think of themselves, then it's hardly surprising that when we try to understand what makes structures of violent domination possible, we tend to look at the existence of antisocial impulses and ask: Why are some people cruel? Why do they desire to dominate others? These, however, are exactly the wrong questions to ask. Humans have an endless variety of urges. Usually, they're pulling us in any number of different directions at once. Their mere existence implies nothing.

The question we should be asking is not why people are sometimes cruel, or even why a few people are usually cruel (all evidence suggests true sadists are an extremely small proportion of the population overall), but how we have come to create institutions that encourage such behavior and that suggest cruel people are in some ways admirable—or at least as deserving of sympathy as those they push around.

Here I think it's important to look carefully at how institutions organize the reactions of the audience. Usually, when we try to imagine the primordial scene of domination, we see some kind of Hegelian master-slave dialectic in which two parties are vying for recognition from one another, leading to one being permanently trampled underfoot. We should imagine instead a three-way relation of aggressor, victim, and witness, one in which both contending parties are appealing for recognition (validation, sympathy, etc.) from someone else. The Hegelian battle for supremacy, after all, is just an abstraction. A just-so story. Few of us have witnessed two grown men duel to the death in order to get the other to recognize him as truly human. The three-way scenario, in which one party pummels another while both appeal to those around them to recognize their humanity, we've all witnessed and participated in, taking one role or the other, a thousand times since grade school.

we do have a tendency to treat those forms of violent domination that do exist—starting with that of men over women—as moral imperatives unto themselves.

Elementary (School) Structures of Domination

I am speaking, of course, about schoolyard bullying. Bullying, I propose, represents a kind of elementary structure of human domination. If we want to understand how everything goes wrong, this is where we should begin.

In this case too, provisos must be introduced. It would be very easy to slip back into crude evolutionary arguments. There is a tradition of thought—the Lord of the Flies tradition, we might call it—that interprets schoolyard bullies as a modern incarnation of the ancestral "killer ape," the primordial alpha male who instantly restores the law of the jungle once no longer restrained by rational adult male authority. But this is clearly false. In fact, books like Lord of the Flies are better read as meditations on the kind of calculated techniques of terror and intimidation that British public schools employed to shape upper-class children into officials capable of running an empire. These techniques did not emerge in the absence of authority; they were techniques designed to create a certain sort of cold-blooded, calculating adult male authority to begin with.

Today, most schools are not like the Eton and Harrow of William Golding's day, but even at those that boast of their