

everything people produce typically get dominated by a chief, leader, or elite class (who take some of their wealth with them to the grave for easy interpretation by later archaeologists). So were our minds “structured in advance of experience” for hierarchy or for equality?

For hierarchy, according to the anthropologist Christopher Boehm. Boehm studied tribal cultures early in his career, but had also studied chimpanzees with Jane Goodall. He recognized the extraordinary similarities in the ways that humans and chimpanzees display dominance and submission. In his book *Hierarchy in the Forest*, Boehm concluded that human beings are innately hierarchical, but that at some point during the last million years our ancestors underwent a “political transition” that allowed them to live as egalitarians by banding together to rein in, punish, or kill any would-be alpha males who tried to dominate the group.

Alpha male chimps are not truly *leaders* of their groups. They perform some public services, such as mediating conflicts.²⁸ But most of the time, they are better described as *bullies* who take what they want. Yet even among chimpanzees, it sometimes happens that subordinates gang up to take down alphas, occasionally going as far as to kill them.²⁹ Alpha male chimps must therefore know their limits and have enough political skill to cultivate a few allies and stave off rebellion.

Imagine early hominid life as a tense balance of power between the alpha (and an ally or two) and the larger set of males who are shut out of power. Then arm everyone with spears. The balance of power is likely to shift when physical strength no longer decides the outcome of every fight. That’s essentially what happened, Boehm suggests, as our ancestors developed better weapons for hunting and butchering beginning around five hundred thousand years ago, when the archaeological record begins to show a flowering of tool and

weapon types.³⁰ Once early humans had developed spears, anyone could kill a bullying alpha male. And if you add the ability to communicate with language, and note that every human society uses language to gossip about moral violations,³¹ then it becomes easy to see how early humans developed the ability to unite in order to shame, ostracize, or kill anyone whose behavior threatened or simply annoyed the rest of the group.

Boehm’s claim is that at some point during the last half-million years, well after the advent of language, our ancestors created the first true moral communities.³² In these communities, people used gossip to identify behavior they didn’t like, particularly the aggressive, dominating behaviors of would-be alpha males. On the rare occasions when gossip wasn’t enough to bring them into line, they had the ability to use weapons to take them down. Boehm quotes a dramatic account of such a community in action among the !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert:

A man named Twi had killed three other people, when the community, in a rare move of unanimity, ambushed and fatally wounded him in full daylight. As he lay dying, all of the men fired at him with poisoned arrows until, in the words of one informant, “he looked like a porcupine.” Then, after he was dead, all the women as well as the men approached his body and stabbed him with spears, symbolically sharing the responsibility for his death.³³

It’s not that human nature suddenly changed and became egalitarian; men still tried to dominate others when they could get away with it. Rather, people armed with weapons and gossip created what Boehm calls “reverse dominance hierar-