IDEOLOGY AND REVOLUTION

There is a constant struggle between powerful, institutionalized hierarchies and people who try to resist them. Whether this resistance succeeds (either partially or completely) or fails, the struggle causes large-scale social change, including changes in morality and institutions and in how hierarchy and the struggle itself are conceived. In this book, Allen Buchanan analyzes the complex connections between the struggle for liberation from domination, ideology, and changes in morality and institutions, and develops a conflict theory of social change. He examines the co-evolutionary and co-dependent nature of the struggle between hierarchs and resisters, and the appeals to morality which are routinely made by both sides. His book will be of interest to a broad readership of students and scholars in philosophy, history, political science, economics, sociology, and law.

ALLEN BUCHANAN is Laureate Professor of Philosophy and Freedom Center Research Professor, University of Arizona. He is the author of fifteen books and many articles and book chapters on topics in bioethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of international law.

IDEOLOGY AND REVOLUTION

How the Struggle against Domination Drives the Evolution of Morality and Institutions

ALLEN BUCHANAN
University of Arizona

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009542524

DOI: 10.1017/9781009542494

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-009-54252-4 Hardback

Contents

Preface

Some human beings seek to dominate others. They have often succeeded on a massive scale, creating powerful, institutionalized hierarchies that afforded them ample opportunities to abuse their power. Yet many, perhaps most, human beings, desire to be free from control by others, at least when that control is arbitrary – when it is exercised in ways that disregard their interests, treating them as resources to be exploited. And some are willing to bear large costs and take terrible risks to escape such treatment. Sometimes resistance to hierarchy succeeds, sometimes it fails. And sometimes there is partial success: Limits on the abuses of hierarchical power are achieved. Sometimes the struggle against hierarchy produces morally progressive changes, sometimes regression, sometimes reinforcement of the status quo. Whether the results of the struggle have been predominantly progressive across all the venues in which it has taken place is not clear; but this much is certain: It has caused large-scale social change, including changes in morality and institutions and in how hierarchy and the struggle itself are conceived. To understand this struggle is to understand much about who we are as human beings.

Both sides in the struggle typically invoke moral norms[1] and concepts in order to mobilize and sustain support for their cause and to undermine support for that of their opponents. Hierarchs usually do not rely solely on their superior power to coerce; they try to justify their possession of it, to convince those they dominate that they have authority, that their exercise of coercive power is legitimate, rightful. Resisters do not just attack hierarchical institutions directly; they attack the justifications for them as well, denying that the power hierarchs exercise is rightful, instead claiming that it is exploitive, or otherwise oppressive or unjust.

[1] I use the term "norm" to cover rules and principles. Norms in this sense are invoked, explicitly or implicitly in the making of moral judgments or at least in efforts to justify them.

The moral discourses of hierarchs and resisters evolve in response to one another, with new concepts and norms regarding the proper accession to and uses of unequal power developing over time and new institutions emerging to put them into effect. The interaction between hierarchs and resisters is strategic in the sense that the behavior of each of the opposing groups is not only goal-directed, but also based in part on a consideration of how the other group has behaved and on anticipation of how it will behave.

Pondering the perpetual struggle between hierarchs and resisters raises two questions. (i) Why is it conducted in moral terms; why don't leaders on both sides simply appeal to self-interest? (ii) Can an examination of the struggle as it has occurred at different times and in a variety of societies yield knowledge of how to control unequal power, how to reduce the opportunities for abuse, while reaping the benefits of hierarchical institutions, especially their ability to achieve the complex coordination needed for the functioning of modern societies?

The Aim of This Book

This book answers both questions. It does so by combining a descriptive-explanatory theory of social change, so far as it results from the struggle between hierarchs and resisters, with a normative assessment of the changes illuminated by the descriptive-explanatory theory. The result of this combination is a naturalistic approach to social change, not in the sense of an attempt to reduce normative issues to factual ones, but rather a commitment to making sure that factual premises in moral reasoning involved in evaluating the results of the struggle are supported by the best available descriptive-explanatory theory.

A Theory of Social Change

Mine is a conflict theory of social change. The conflict upon which I mainly focus occurs under conditions of great inequality of power, where there is an established *comprehensive hierarchy* and some of those who are relegated to an inferior position resist the hierarchs' exercise of their superior power. By a comprehensive hierarchy, I mean one that includes relationships of subordination that encompass all or at least most members of a society other than the hierarchs themselves. In contrast, a limited hierarchy is one in which only some subgroup of the population is subordinated. Examples include gender and racial hierarchies. Although

the primary focus will be on comprehensive hierarchies, I will also have much to say about the struggle against limited hierarchies.[2]

The Descriptive-Explanatory Project

The descriptive-explanatory framework of my theory of social change has five components.

1. There is a perpetual struggle between hierarchs and those who resist hierarchy. The struggle is perpetual, not in the sense of being continuously occurring at all times and places, but in the sense that so long as hierarchies exist, so does their potential for domination and the prospect of resistance to that domination.
2. Both parties to the struggle strategically deploy moral concepts and norms in justifications regarding the proper accession to and uses of the unequal power that characterizes hierarchies *in order to form and sustain coalitions and to undermine the coalitions of their opponents.*
3. Because moral appeals in support of or against existing hierarchies are more effective if they are embedded in ideologies, the struggle is also often a competition between ideologies.
4. The interaction between the opposing moralized strategies is *co-evolutionary*: resisters develop moralized challenges to hierarchy, hierarchs respond with new moralized defenses of hierarchy, to which resisters respond, and so on and so forth.
5. The co-evolutionary dynamic of the perpetual struggle is a major driver of the evolution of morality and of institutions, so far as they are concerned with the distribution and uses of power.

There is a simpler way to characterize the descriptive-explanatory theory: A major cause of social and political change is the competition between evolving *moral technologies for managing hierarchy*.

From one perspective, this descriptive-explanatory framework is a device for understanding the evolution of morality so far as it changes as a result

[2] An oppressive limited hierarchy may exist alongside of a comprehensive hierarchy that is structured in accordance with the official allocation of political power set out in a constitution (whether written or not). Two examples immediately come to mind. The first is the existence in the United States during the Jim Crow period of an institutionalized racial hierarchy, mainly at the level of individual states, co-existing with a federal hierarchical constitutional order that officially affirmed an equal status for all citizens. The second example is the persistence of the caste system in India, in spite of the fact that the Constitution and federal law of that country clearly view caste-based relationships of domination as impermissible.

of the struggle over unequal power**.** From another, it assigns a significant role to morality – and to ideology – in explaining institutional change.[3] My central descriptive-explanatory claim is that the perpetual struggle between hierarchs and resisters is one important source of social change and that consequently a theory of social change should include an analysis of the perpetual struggle. Item (2) is the most basic element of my descriptive-explanatory framework and it provides my answer to the first question, (i): Why is the struggle conducted in moral terms? The answer is that *the struggle includes appeals to morality because they facilitate forming and sustaining coalitions and coalitions are necessary for effective participation in the struggle.*

The Normative Project

The normative dimension of the book focuses primarily on question (ii) posed above: Can an understanding of the struggle as it has occurred so far yield knowledge of how to curb the tendency of hierarchs to abuse their power, how to devise an effective moral technology for managing hierarchy? My answer will be that the struggle has produced morally progressive results regarding the management of hierarchical power in the past and that we can learn how this has occurred and use that knowledge to devise effective ways of controlling hierarchies. I will also argue, however, that there is no guarantee that in the future the struggle will produce progressive results or that, if it does, they will be durable. That is the bad news. The good news is that, as I will show in Chapter 1, there are at least eight recurring patterns exhibited in the struggle that have produced progressive results in the past and that may do so in the future.

A second important component of my normative project is an exploration of the prospects for morally progressive change brought about through the most extreme form of resistance to hierarchy: revolution. After developing a descriptive-explanatory account of revolution, I will argue that although there is no general answer to the question of whether reform or revolution is the best path to moral progress, much can be said about how different revolutionary contexts contribute to differences in the outcomes of revolutions. I will also emphasize that the perennial Conservative slogan "reform, not revolution" overlooks the fact that

[3] For an illuminating and original account of other ways in which morality drives social and institutional change, see Kumar and Campbell, *A Better Ape: The Evolution of the Moral Mind and How It Made Us Human.*

reform efforts frequently trigger revolutions that no one initially intended or foresaw.

I am aware that any mention of moral progress raises hackles in some quarters, and I understand why this is so. In the Introduction, I address this negative reaction by articulating and criticizing its sources: the conviction that the concept is irretrievably tainted by its use to justify White supremacy, colonialism, imperialism, and oppressive communist regimes; and the belief that Normative Ethical Relativism is a valid metaethical view and that it implies that we can only speak of moral progress relative to some morality or other, not moral progress for humanity. I then go on to argue that neither of these concerns rules out the judicious use of the concept of moral progress and that therefore my normative project in this book remains intact, viable, and important.

Acknowledgments

It was my collaboration with Robert O. Keohane on four articles that led me to think more deeply about the importance of institutions, about the relationship between institutions and morality, and eventually about institutional change. Bob has many admirable qualities, one of which is his openness to criticisms of his own views and his willingness to learn from people in other disciplines. I was struck by this when he said "What's important is not to have been right, but to be right." Bob has been an inspiring role model. He also provided me with valuable comments on successive draft chapters of this volume. Jonathan Bendor, with whom I have developed an internet intellectual friendship that I greatly value, was exceptionally generous in providing me not only with detailed, insightful, and constructive comments on multiple drafts, but also with guidance as to the relevant social science literature. He has also given much needed encouragement for my undertaking a task that demands much more than what my training as a philosopher supplied. I know of no one who has a better appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the various disciplines that constitute the social sciences.

Because this book is genuinely interdisciplinary, the people who helped me improve the thinking that went into had to transcend their disciplinary boundaries, to leave their comfort zones and adopt new perspectives. That makes their willingness to help me think better about the perpetual struggle all the more the commendable.

Jonathan Anomaly, Richmond Campbell, Will Combs, Ryan Muldoon, Paul Studtman, Ritwik Agrawal, and Julian Culp supplied excellent comments on various drafts. Elizabeth Levinson performed admirably as my research assistant. Travis Quigley did so as well and also provided some of the most valuable comments I received. I owe special thanks to Alexander Motchoulski. Chapter 4 of this volume grew out of an unpublished paper we coauthored. I am also especially indebted to Rachell Powell. My extremely rewarding collaboration with her in writing *The Evolution*

of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory led me to the idea that social change is driven in part by a co-evolutionary struggle over power in which opposing groups employ morality as a strategic weapon. Powell, Alexander Rosenberg, and Robert Brandon all helped me learn to think in evolutionary terms. Rainer Forst provided insightful, constructive comments on each chapter of the penultimate draft. A final revision of the manuscript benefited from a lively discussion of the core ideas at the New York University (NYU) Economics Department under the auspices of Mario Rizzo's Program on the Foundations of the Market Economy. I thank Otto Lehto for suggesting me as a speaker in that program's colloquium series. The economists who participated in that discussion exhibited none of the dogmatic tendencies that have for too long led mainstream economics to neglect the role of morality in human life.

I also want to thank Tom Christiano, Head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Arizona and Mary Rigdon, Director of the Freedom Center at the University of Arizona for their support of my research for this book. Finally, I thank the razor-sharp Political Philosophy graduate students of the University of Arizona Philosophy Department for helping to create a vigorous and cooperative environment in which I do my best work. They are a large part of the reason Arizona is rated number one in Political Philosophy.