

War between the sexes

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Paul Seabright

THE WAR OF THE SEXES

How conflict and cooperation have shaped men and women from prehistory to the present

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Darwinian sexual selection has not, in general, selected for particularly cosy relations between the sexes. The praying mantis female often cannibalizes her mate; she bites his head just as he is delivering his sperm and then completes her meal when he's done. Aside from a hard-to-interpret wiggle, he seems not to protest the terms of the sexual bargain because he is solitary and unlikely to score again. By contrast, the male bedbug is a brutal bully; he has evolved a dagger-like projection with which to slash the female's abdomen. The more graceful water strider has two precision antennae that serve no other purpose than to hold females down. As for the toxin-loaded scorpion, he has evolved a special toxin-lite to subdue the female of his species.

And so it goes. Sex on six legs, or eight, can be a decidedly sordid affair. As Darwin himself observed, one should not look for moral uplift in nature. For the economist and Darwinist Paul Seabright, insect sex nonetheless neatly illustrates the dialectical nature of sexual evolution. Male strategies for "scoring" escalate over time. In dialectic tandem, so do female counterstrategies for evading undesirables and exerting some choice – overt or covert – in their affairs. This is the "war" of his title.

Game theory enables evolutionary biologists and economists such as Seabright to think of the so-called war of the sexes as a strategic game. In general, the male evolves to "want" to score at all costs – whether that means being a bully, a martyr or something else entirely. The female, however, "knows" the real stakes are viable offspring. Of course, neither sex "knows" or "wants", which would imply sentience or introspection; rather, they are unconscious vehicles for such behaviours. Insects and humans alike, we are the descendants of those who happened to play the game exceptionally well.

Cars, sports, human plumage and a great deal else, according to Seabright, all exploit the same basic principle. The wastefulness of the billion-dollar cosmetics industry clearly dismays him even while it enables him to point out the connection between vanity, fertility cues and marketability. Much of the first half of his book cleverly relates the essence of life to cocktail party dynamics. Seabright puts it this way: "Like a conversation at a party with someone who cannot restrain himself from looking over your shoulder to see who else there might be to talk to, sexual relations in almost all species are clouded by the possibility

that either partner might be better off with someone else now or in the future”.

There is, of course, an enormous amount at stake in sexual signalling – in the fitness it signals and the deceptions it enables. To give this the requisite six-legged perspective and so a certain ideological distance, consider Seabright’s favourite model: the dance fly, *Rhamphomyia longicauda*. In this species, males have increased their bargaining power by accumulating food, which they carry in little silken pouches, in order to bribe females for sex. But, it’s not quite a tidy deal: every so often, a male’s silken pouch looks full but is in fact empty; the female dance fly notices the rotten deal too late to backtrack. Naturally, the dancing female has her own wiles. Moving in a swarm of her peers, she tries to attract the best male by signalling greater fertility than she possesses. In fact, the diva or starlet of the swarm is likely to be able to increase her sexiness quotient relative to her peers by filling her abdominal cavity with air. A big abdomen signals a robust supply of eggs – but the most amplified abdomen is likely to be partly or mostly air, perhaps nothing but air.

Natural selection then necessarily selects mostly for enchantment (being responsive to sexual signals). It also, one might surmise, selects for suspicion. The suspicious dance fly would presumably have an edge, so long as she isn’t so suspicious as to put herself out of the game entirely. Seabright’s “war” or “game” can in a sense more felicitously be thought of as a “tango” of desire and suspicion – a dance-like thing of beauty (sometimes) and also of danger or violence. What distinguishes our species’ version of this tango is essentially this: our exceptionally long and resource-intensive childhood. We have colonized an evolutionary niche that requires a huge amount of cooperation to raise our children to adulthood. We know from work in anthropology – synthesized by the primatologist Sarah Hrdy and which Seabright rehearses in his book – that mothers in “pre-historic” contexts could not raise their children to adulthood without what Hrdy terms “helpers at the nest”. Mothers therefore had to corral fathers and probable fathers to share meat on a long-term basis. In general, mothers and their children are more likely to survive if part of an extended sharing network. Our long childhood most likely co-evolved with ever-bigger brains and the inter-subjective skills – the emotional IQ – that facilitate cooperation with kin and as-if kin. Our sexual tangos – or sexual bargains – are then especially fraught because they are so vital to our existence. If a mother mismanages the tango in the context of scarce resources, then her child is less likely to live to reproductive age and reproduce in its turn.

Regarding romance, Seabright argues that we have evolved to be “a socially monogamous species but surreptitiously promiscuous”. Sexual conflicts of interest need not compromise our long-term unions. “We are the species for whom life is about partnerships” – even if every partnership harbours sublimated conflicts of interest. For Seabright as for Freud, the sexual partnership is the template for all others. We can’t create, any more than we can procreate, without others. We exist only in the cocktail party-distracted gaze of the other. Charm is about monopolizing that gaze. Adolescent schoolgirls know this better than anyone. (Seabright reminds his reader that female “cunning” can be charming, even glamorous.) So do business tycoons. Being in the dumpster where no one wants to partner up or collaborate with us makes us physically ill. Fearing the dumpster makes us neurotic. Winning the Oscar or its equivalent gives us extra years of life (compared to also-rans), according to a now-famous study, because everyone wants to partner or cooperate with us. In other words, our emotions and health are intimately tied up with where we stand in the cooperative or partnering hierarchy – with our bargaining power in effect.

The more pragmatic point made by Seabright is that women are shaped by evolution to play the cooperatively competitive game differently – and these differences have implications today in the world of work. One of his chapters takes on Freud’s question: what do women want? Seabright doesn’t answer this question any more than Freud did – other than to assume that women want bargaining power: to evade the dumpster across the lifespan. But Seabright does in very specific ways address another question: why aren’t women at present commanding as much economic capital as men? They still earn less than eighty cents to every dollar men earn. They are still vastly under-represented among CEOs. Yet, IQ tests and the like

suggest women are every bit as talented as men. In addition, they now control their fertility, which arguably makes humans essentially a new species. If we invoke the dance fly, then we could say that women now have silken pouches that they also control – and which rival or outweigh those of men. They have more of what the post-industrial economy values: education. A fairly stable 30 per cent of males have earned bachelor's degrees for decades on end – as if they've reached the limit of gender adaptability. In the West, the percentage of women earning degrees by contrast has tripled since 1970 and is inching towards 40 per cent. And yet the conundrum, as it were, is that even as men are, in theory, getting more disposable, they continue to command positions of power disproportionately.

Seabright identifies a ragbag of gender differences that might partially, but only partially, explain gender inequities at the top. Some of these differences detrimentally affect women's visibility in the workplace, whereas the economic significance of other differences is debatable. For instance, it seems that women have evolved to network differently: men's contacts, including their friendships, are generally more transactional and opportunistic. They betray and forgive each other more seamlessly (47 per cent are easily reconciled, compared to 18 per cent of females, according to one study he cites). They have a greater number of "weak" ties. Women's contacts, by contrast, are more emotionally laden "strong" ties with kin and people like themselves. Other research suggests men may thrive in starkly competitive environments (for instance, tournament-type settings), whereas women typically do better in more ostensibly cooperative ones. Yet other studies confirm what teachers already know: boys and men are likely to feel more confident and project more confidence than girls or women with the same or superior skills. Finally, it is indeed true that men generally negotiate with their bosses more aggressively – and on average male bosses negotiate more aggressively with women employees.

It's important to keep in mind that these differences are based on averages – we can all think of plenty of exceptions. Seabright's larger assumption is that on average, gender differences, however small, must result from the sexual strategies our ancestors used to procreate successfully. The reproductive output between the most successful and least successful male is potentially enormous – but this is not the case with females. Genghis Khan fathered a dizzying number of offspring – and other conquering or extremely conspicuous types fathered far more than their share; many hapless male rivals produced few or none as a result. By contrast, a powerful female like Cleopatra produced a mere four, perhaps no more than her lowliest female slaves. Risk-taking is likely to have paid off in reproductive terms for males in a way it didn't for females. Or, put differently: extreme behaviour – risk-taking and the kind of over-confidence that enables it – was more likely to be selected for among our male ancestors. Similarly, there are plenty of evolutionary reasons to expect females to be more risk averse, somewhat more conscientious and to favour more cooperative settings. These evolutionary-honed traits or preferences persist – even if we are a "new" species.

Oddly, Seabright doesn't get to the obvious reason why women are handicapped in the workplace until almost the end of his book – namely, maternity. Women take career breaks just when their careers are in their upward trajectories. They thus lose all-important visibility at a crucial time; a lot of research in fact suggests that the late twenties and early thirties are the worst time to step off the professional ladder. In the context of long lifespans, women are acting against their own long-term self-interest – against their later "bargaining power". Seabright gallantly argues that it's "stupid" for women to be penalized for being conscientious about motherhood. In addition, losing female talent and productivity in midlife is bad for the economy. The workplace – and our methods of organizing work – ought instead to make women the model sex.

Seabright's solution is straightforward: "compulsory paternity leave", so that career breaks don't signal, as he puts it, a lack of CEO potential. This would certainly be a step in the right direction. Whether this would solve gender disparities at the top is unclear. Whether it's enforceable is also unclear. Career breaks don't just entail potentially losing visibility or signalling power, but also losing momentum – which is a different issue. The timing of those breaks matter, and men still have by fiat of nature a longer horizon, and can, in

theory, postpone reproduction until their careers are well established and their visibility assured. Women generally can't do this – at least not quite yet.

The author closes his book with the hope that sexual and economic relations will be fully disentangled in the future. This seems less likely than enforced paternity leave; after all, Paul Seabright himself jauntily confesses at the outset that his “stone-age brain” is especially reactive when encountering young nubile females of his own species. That's hard to legislate away.

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