

## Understanding “Us” versus “Them”

Jeffrey Sachs

I’m afraid I’m going to talk more today about the obstacles to love than I am about love itself. I’m going to talk about the social circumstances in which hate arises, and particularly about the issues we’re facing in our country and in the world right now, on a morning when dozens more people have been killed in Iraq, and when American warplanes are routinely bombing civilian neighborhoods in a manner that would have seemed utterly impossible—shocking and barbaric—to many of us, I think, just a short time ago.

The newspapers are dreadful in what they *don’t* tell us every day. The *New York Times* reported yesterday, “American armored vehicles roared through the villages surrounding Falluja, the western town at the heart of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, on Friday, as warplanes pounded rebel positions and ground forces ratcheted up their preparations for what appeared to be an imminent assault on the city.”<sup>1</sup> This is sheer propaganda, because already in the first line is the idea that our warplanes are pounding “rebel positions,” not bombing civilian neighborhoods. We learned last week from *The Lancet* magazine, which published the most serious epidemiological study that has been undertaken regarding the casualties in Iraq since the war began, that there are by best estimates—though admittedly this is with high uncertainty—100,000 deaths in excess of what would have been expected based on prewar circumstances, and that the vast majority of those deaths have come through violent attacks by U.S. forces, principally bombing by our aircraft.<sup>2</sup> And so we enact *Guernica* every day, and our newspapers report it as “warplanes pounding rebel positions.” The Associated Press this morning said the same thing, that Marines fired a barrage of artillery at “rebel positions” inside Falluja; U.S. jets have been pounding the “rebel bastion” for days—not the city.

*Jeffrey Sachs*

This is an obstacle to love, I would say. This is mass slaughter under the rubric of foreign policy. We really need to understand—and we don't—what is happening: how our society is becoming dehumanized and dehumanizing, in ways that so many other societies have been in the past. We need to understand this so that we can get a grip on ourselves, first and foremost. We also need to understand this so that we can help address all of the much deeper unmet challenges of the world that we really could do something about.

Every day, as we are killing uncounted numbers of innocent civilians in Iraq, we're also, on the other hand, leaving perhaps 20,000 innocents—in Africa, principally, but also in other parts of the world—to die of malaria, an utterly preventable and treatable disease; of AIDS; of tuberculosis; of diarrheal disease; of simple respiratory infections; because while we are spending \$450 billion on our military adventures, we are spending just \$15 billion in total for everything we purport to do in the world with regard to development aid for poor countries. Incidentally, of that \$15 billion in aid money, \$2 billion in total is for Africa, where thousands die every day, and perhaps 6 million die every year, of absolutely preposterous—tragic, because easily preventable—causes.

So that's the world we're living in, and the world we need to understand. Love, or the obstacles to love, has a lot to do with this world, because right now in our society we are unable to take seriously life and its value. And no one seems less able to take seriously the value of life than the so-called pro-life forces. We need to think more seriously about life after the fetus is born. If we did, we'd have a different approach.

It is stunning to me, and a matter of profound personal angst as well, that religion—at least some aspects of it—seems unable to address this issue in any suitable manner right now. What we are told by the opinion surveys is that on average, those in our society who report the greatest degree of religious observance are those who most strongly support the war effort and hold most strongly some of the dangerous notions pushing us in this direction.

In recent surveys that you can find at the web site of the Pew Research Center (<http://pewresearch.org>)—a wonderful site with tremendous amounts of detailed information from over a dozen surveys every year—you can learn how various kinds of demographic indicators and degrees of religious observance correlate with attitudes towards the war in Iraq, towards Islam, and toward many

## *Understanding "Us" versus "Them"*

other political and social issues. Regarding the military effort in Iraq, of all the demographic breakdowns that are offered—by income, by class, by education, by gender, by race, by region—the category that most strongly supports the war in Iraq was white, Protestant, evangelical Christians. In a survey conducted this summer, 69 percent of this group said it was the right decision to go to war against Iraq, and 22 percent felt it was the wrong decision. In no other demographic group did the proportion of members expressing approval of the war come anywhere close to this.<sup>3</sup>

When one tries to understand what might lie behind this, it's perhaps not surprising to note—in fact, this is exactly what I'll argue—that correlated with the approval of going to war with Iraq is a radical "us"-versus-"them" vision of the world. In particular, Pew Research Center surveys also tell us that the demographic cohort in our society that most strongly holds an "unfavorable" view of Islam is exactly the same cohort that most strongly supports the war. In a survey that was conducted in July 2004 the question was asked whether the respondents had a favorable or unfavorable view of Islam. Within the overall survey, 39 percent of the American public answered "favorable" and 37 percent answered "unfavorable." But again, after scanning all of the categories, one notices that within the white evangelical Protestant group—about a quarter of the population—a greater proportion of respondents had a negative view of Islam: 46 percent said they viewed Islam unfavorably, 29 percent favorably. Among those white evangelical Protestants who reported attending church weekly, the difference was even more strident: 54 percent viewed Islam unfavorably, 23 percent favorably. No other division in the entire survey, none of the other demographic categories, expressed anything close to this degree of disapproval. White Catholics reported, on balance, a positive view of Islam (43 percent answered "favorable," 34 percent "unfavorable"); those who called themselves secular had positive view (50 percent favorable, 25 percent unfavorable). Non-evangelical white Protestants also had, on balance, a positive view (40 percent favorable, 36 percent unfavorable).<sup>4</sup>

So we have had confirmed what perhaps we knew intuitively, but needed to better understand. The swing vote in the presidential election, and by far the most strongly targeted vote of the election, the group that split 80-20 in favor of President Bush, was not only the so-called religious voters, but particularly those voters who have the strongest tendency to divide the world into good and evil, into

*Jeffrey Sachs*

those they view favorably and those they view unfavorably. Along with expressing this tendency, white evangelical Protestants were also the single group in our society most in favor of the war in Iraq. These survey findings raise a lot of questions, of course, about the role in our society of this variant of religion—one of the largest, most important religious trends, certainly the most ascendant in our society.

I'm completely unequipped to give you a proper, full answer to such questions. All I can do is share with you one part of an answer from the disciplines I am responsible for knowing at least a little bit about: the disciplines within the human sciences and the social sciences that try to understand, through various scientific approaches, the bases of human nature. There are four different sciences that have come together recently to help advance our understanding of these issues, and I want to take a few minutes to share with you insights from them.

The first of these fields is evolutionary science, in particular the early, still-important attempts of evolutionary psychology to understand what kind of behavioral imprints may have been selected in the course of human evolution. The second is animal-behavior experimentation, which now shows us some of the tendencies towards or reasons for cooperation or lack of cooperation, how behavioral norms evolve, and how the sense of fairness develops, in other primates as well as in humans. The third is neurobiology, which increasingly is giving us interesting tools for grasping why humans behave the way they do in situations in which they have choices between cooperating or not cooperating with others. And the fourth is game theory, so-called, which tries to understand how people behave in specified, carefully designed circumstances in which their cooperation or noncooperation can lead to alternative payoffs—benefits or losses—for them vis-à-vis others. All of these approaches, coming together, help us better understand some of the conundrums of human society: why societies do or do not cooperate, why individuals do or do not cooperate, and how cultural institutions—and in this instance, particularly religious institutions—coevolve, in reflection of our deeper human instincts, if you will.

What do the biologists have to say about these issues, at least as I understand them? A first point is that the purely biological view of natural selection and evolution suggest that cooperation per se between individuals of a species is actually a rather rare phenome-

## *Understanding "Us" versus "Them"*

non. In the species in which we see large degrees of cooperation, the social insects, that cooperation is easily understood. Every individual in the colony is virtually identical genetically—they are at least siblings—and there is a biological basis to their very strong degree of cooperation. It is awe-inspiring, of course, what is accomplished with that degree of genetic similarity, molded by natural selection to produce wondrous behaviors and outcomes. There is a very sophisticated division of responsibility in social-insect communities, but this is surely grounded on the underlying genetic near-identity of sibling populations in those communities.

Other than the social insects, there is no species, nothing closely resembling the human species, that displays anything like the degree of cooperation that human beings display, and display routinely. In nature there is a great deal of cooperative behavior between individuals of a species, but such behavior does not exhibit anything close to the complexity that we see in our species. Probably the best explanation of the cooperative behavior we see in other species is an extension of the explanation for the cooperative behavior of the social insects: what's called *kin altruism*, or *kin-based altruism*, or *kin selection*. These are terms for the idea that individuals cooperate with other individuals to which they are related. The individuals don't have to be genetically identical to cooperate. So long as the relationship is close enough—brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, cousins—one individual of a species will take risks for another individual, because taking those risks, or accepting those individual costs of cooperation, improves the probability that genetic material closely resembling that individual's genetic material will be propagated, thus also propagating the genes that enabled that cooperative behavior in the first place. In other words, nature can select for cooperative behavior. Outside of the human species, however, this is pretty limited, and when it does take place, what is being selected is genetic coding for cooperative behavior that is beneficial for closely related kin.

It makes sense that the natural selection of cooperative behavior would be limited, because the dominant idea of natural selection is that there is an intense fight for survival between the individuals of any particular species. That is the whole point that Charles Darwin, building on the insight of Thomas Malthus, understood already a century and a half ago. (It probably doesn't help our discourse that only 12 percent of the American public professes to believe in natural selection. This puts us at a disadvantage in hav-

ing a good discussion of these issues. According to a February 2001 Gallup poll, nearly half of the American public hold a strict creationist view, another 37 percent hold a more or less religious-evolutionist view, and only 12 percent profess a belief in natural selection.<sup>5</sup> I profess a belief in natural selection, and I believe that without such belief it's pretty hopeless for us to make much headway in drawing upon the sciences to help us understand these issues, because within the whole gamut of modern science, natural selection is one of the most deeply, strongly, pervasively documented of our scientific ideas.)

The examples of kin selection pose, then, a big biological puzzle for humans. The question is not, "Why do humans kill each other, or fight with each other, or struggle with each other?"—because biologists take those behaviors as the normal baseline. The question is rather, "Why do humans cooperate with each other as much as they do?" And it is quite remarkable how much we do cooperate. It's quite tragic that we fail to cooperate even more, because we could do so much more to enrich our lives. But, still, the level of cooperation is phenomenal compared with anything else seen in nature other than, for example, a bee colony.

The ideas of sociobiology generally cluster around the notion that for human beings, there is a positive selection advantage to cooperative behavior; and there is a lot of evidence for this. There is still the conundrum, however, of why we see so much more of this behavior in the human species than in animal species. The question leads us to explore the idea that underpinning cooperation between humans is the uniquely human, cultural propagation of norms and values, not merely the biological propagation of genetically coded behavior.

The basic idea that evolutionary biologists and game theorists have tried to explore is the concept of altruism, defined with various degrees of subtlety. They have described, as one major variant, what they call *reciprocal altruism*. The idea of reciprocal altruism is that I'll cooperate with you if I can expect some return from you in the future; I'll give up something in the short run in order to gain the mutual advantage that is the point of cooperation. It may be costly for me at the moment to cooperate with you compared with tricking you, but I'll do it if I can expect a future return. Instead of, or in addition to, kin-based altruism, which is genetically coded, human beings exhibit reciprocal altruism, which is culturally based. The tendency toward reciprocal altruism could, conceivably, be geneti-

## Understanding "Us" versus "Them"

cally coded, but it would be only in the human species that my cooperation with you is predicated somehow on the notion that in the future I'm going to get something in return.

Now how might I be able to expect that in the future, I will get something in return? One way is through my having a reputation as a cooperator, so that other cooperative individuals will be willing to work with me, knowing that I am likely to cooperate with them. Another way is through what is called an *iterated gain*, which occurs when we have repeated occasions to deal with each other in business or in social interactions. If you and I are interacting repeatedly, then cheating on you early on is probably not a great way to encourage your cooperation, extending into the future. Repeated interactions, in which individuals learn whether they can trust one another, can support a level of cooperation that a single, anonymous interaction cannot support. These concepts of reputational altruism, or reciprocal altruism, have been developed through observation and confirmation in experimental settings.

It's also been noticed that a particular pattern of behavior called the *tit-for-tat strategy* is pretty robust among humans in small-group interactions. The situation, in general, with cooperation is that if we cooperate with each other, we will both be better off. But if you take the cooperative step and I trick you or cheat you, I'm better off than you are in the short term, because you've contributed something on my behalf and I have not contributed something on your behalf. On the other hand, if neither of us ever trusts the other and we both cheat—or what the game theorists call *defect*—all the time, then we both lose. So the puzzle is, how can we sustain a good cooperative outcome over time? The *tit-for-tat strategy* is a way to achieve this. It is described as *cooperative*, *retaliatory*, and *forgiving*. It works like this: the first time you deal with someone—let's say you are hoping to develop a new business partnership—you cooperate with the other person. If your partner then cheats on you, you don't cooperate with him or her the next time, because you're not a sucker. You revert to a noncooperative, non-trusting position. But if, later on, the cheater comes to you on his or her hands and knees, begging your apology and indulgence, and starts cooperating again, you shift back to cooperating. You've made your point. The cheating won't happen again. And so this strategy is called *cooperative*, because you start out on a cooperative basis. It's called *retaliatory*, because if you are cheated, you stop cooperating; you stop putting your money into the common till. And it's

Jeffrey Sachs

called *forgiving*, because if you are cheated but the other side reverts to cooperative behavior, you're willing to go back to being cooperative also, because there's an advantage to it in the end. This basic strategy has shown its social value in innumerable real-world circumstances and in innumerable test circumstances in what's called *experimental game theory*.

One problem with the concepts of reciprocal altruism and the tit-for-tat strategy, however, is that they still don't explain why we cooperate in an anonymous setting, why we behave as well as we do in that kind of situation. Even when we don't know the people—when we're at a restaurant in a foreign city, for example—most of us still leave a tip, even though we're never going to see that waiter again. Most of us do, because we think it's "the right thing to do." An idea that comes into play here is that in society there seem to be individuals who are *pure altruists*, and they play a double role. The pure altruists get pleasure in following social norms of cooperation, and they reward the cooperators by making the effort to praise them. They also take pleasure in punishing the noncooperators. So the pure altruists are enforcers of social norms through positive and negative incentives. What the game theorists have shown is that if you sprinkle into a population some of these pure altruists—the term doesn't mean they're nice people; they could be people who take delight in punishing others who violate social norms—their presence can support a tremendous amount of cooperation, even among relatively anonymous individuals who are interacting without a heavy dose of repeated interactions.

Where neurobiology enters the picture is in showing, through nuclear magnetic resonance scans, the actual release of endorphins and various other brain markers in people who are punishing norm-violators in game settings. The brilliant neurobiologists are increasingly able to find physical markers of the pleasures of cooperation and the pleasures of norm enforcement. This means that there could be a mixture of hardwired behaviors and culturally set behaviors in human beings that have an actual physical reflection in brain biology, which may play a role in making one's behavior consistent with social norms. This is at least the beginning of a natural, biological and behavioral explanation of why and how cooperation among human beings is extended much more broadly than we see in other species, including other mammals.

Our next step is to understand the social context of cooperative and noncooperative behaviors. Here the basic idea is that if



## *Understanding "Us" versus "Them"*

you're in a setting where cooperation counts, but where there's geographical isolation and limited migration between different groups, a paradox can arise: behavior can be selected that supports strong within-group cooperation and strong across-group noncooperation. Under the right circumstances—for example, where you have many different societies competing over scarce resources, and there's not a lot of migration or intermarriage between these groups—the result that arises, according to game theory, is the evolution of cooperation within the group, but also the development of very strong social norms against cross-group cooperation. And the cross-group noncooperation strengthens the within-group coherence.

This begins to sound a lot like religion, because almost all religious precepts promote strong within-group cooperation and often very aggressive cross-group noncooperation, frequently backed by tremendous taboos against sitting down to eat with members of another group, certainly against intermarriage with them, against even business relations, and the like. This paradox—of a society fostering a tremendous amount of cooperative behavior, but within a sea of noncooperation and conflict—is called an evolutionarily stable strategy. It occurs in a context in which groups without a lot of natural migration—say, because of geographical boundaries—need to strengthen their internal cohesion because of competition with an external group.

One can think of what those geographical and ecological boundaries might be. The boundary between followers of Christianity and followers of Islam, for the last one thousand years, has been the boundary between the humid, temperate zone of Europe and the northern tip of Africa, and the arid zones, the so-called B climates, the steppes and the desert climates across northern Africa, Arabia, and into Central Asia. Migration, lifestyles, and patterns of survival have been quite different between these ecological divides. And what the theory might suggest—speaking now very loosely—is a hardening of attitudes across that ecological division, and the development of very strong norms of within-group cooperation and across-group noncooperation, confrontation, and even violence. And this, of course, is what we have seen.

Of course I'm speaking in extremely generic and superficial terms, but perceptions of "the clash of civilizations," of wars across religious groups, are now upon us as we certainly could not have expected just a few years ago. I believe that what we're seeing now are the kinds of us-versus-them attitudes and behaviors that reflect

Jeffrey Sachs

very deep human traits, which tend to become exacerbated, as the theory emphasizes, during times of crisis.

In all of the strategic interactions I've been describing, there are multiple possible outcomes and multiple possible dynamics. Our trust in the Other depends on recent history and recent behaviors, and downward spirals of distrust and conflict can easily arise out of circumstances in which just previously there was at least a fragile sense of cooperation across groups. Because of the terrible anxieties wrought by 9/11, and the lies and blunders of the administration, our country has been on a course of profound dehumanization of the Other in Iraq, to the point where—as indicated by the *New York Times* and Associated Press stories I mentioned earlier—we don't even regard life and death under the bombs as worthy of reporting or counting. And so what was decried as a massacre at My Lai thirty years ago is not even considered worthy of mention now. The blitheness and ease with which we kill tens of thousands is a sign of our dehumanization.

How many of you noticed the study reported in *The Lancet*, by the way? How many of you read anguished accounts in the *New York Times* about the implications of that study? I didn't see any. Maybe there was a short notice of it. But if so it came and went, because we didn't think it worth pausing even to ask what it would mean if in fact that study is right, and 100,000 civilians have been killed by us; this wasn't considered worth even reflecting upon. All year the *New York Times* has reported, not the story of civilian deaths, but American attitudes toward the war. In May 2004, the Times conducted interviews in Oswego, Illinois, a small city portrayed as a good place to "sample mainstream Republican opinion." One businessman is quoted as saying, "Let's kill them all. Let's wipe them off the face of the earth." The same article quotes Rush Limbaugh remarking, in response to the Abu Ghraib prison photographs, "They're the ones who are perverted. They are the ones who are dangerous. They are the ones who are subhuman. They are the ones who are human debris, not the United States of America, not our soldiers and not our prison guards."<sup>6</sup> These are the mechanisms of profound dehumanization of the Other, which is the psychological, political, and social preparation for mass killing accompanied by feelings of vindication and self-righteousness.

Incidentally, I think that behind the international revulsion at our actions in Iraq was one simple notion. If you think about this deeply embedded sense of what is a fair strategy in a competitive

## *Understanding "Us" versus "Them"*

world—the tit-for-tat strategy of *cooperate, retaliate, forgive* that I have described—then starting out with the noncooperative approach, where a new government in the United States launches a preemptive attack, is a fundamental violation of what we take to be appropriate behavior. My own view is that the preemptive war doctrine is not just an uneasy, problematic thing, but runs against profoundly held views about what is appropriate and fair behavior. We fundamentally depend on cooperation, and if we start out in a non-cooperative mode, that's where we're surely going to end up.

Let me conclude with the observation that in the midst of killing each other in Iraq with increasing frequency and with increasing dehumanization, at least as tragic as the direct misery resulting from these actions—perhaps even more tragic, in an arithmetic sense—are all of our lost opportunities, the things that we're not doing by failing to cooperate on the planet.

For me, the costs of the Iraq war are not only the 100,000 civilian deaths in Iraq and the 1,100 American deaths on the ground, or the \$200 billion that has been or is about to be spent on this ludicrous, tragic, wrongheaded effort, but also the fact that the war has utterly and completely taken our attention away from the things that we need to be doing if we really are "pro-life" for the people who are alive on the planet today, and for their children and their children's children. We're neglecting massively the suffering of the poor in the world. We're failing to respond to the literally millions and millions of lives we could be saving if we devoted a tiny fraction of what we're devoting to war toward buying bed nets to help prevent poor children in Africa from dying of malaria by the thousands every day; or toward helping to get antiretroviral medicine to people dying of AIDS—to the two million who will die of AIDS in Africa this year; or toward helping get soil nutrients to farmers, so that hundreds of millions of people will not go to bed hungry every night and thereby become vulnerable to death by infectious diseases that wouldn't kill anyone who had an adequate level of nutrition. And of course in the same way, we're also neglecting the great, longer-term challenges of the profound environmental degradation and climate change that we're instilling, which is not just hypothetical, not just something for "the day after tomorrow," but is here today. It's the drought over the last fifteen years that stands behind the current situation in Darfur, which we portray as a political disaster but which is actually an ecological catastrophe. It is the insufficient rainfall in eastern Sudan that has pitted communities

*Jeffrey Sachs*

against each other who are together fighting for survival, with not enough to eat and not enough water for their herds and flocks.

These are the things we ought to be working on. As we divide the world between “us” and “them” and we make our best efforts to kill the “them,” what we’re also doing is killing our own hopes.

## Notes

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