The Currency of Status



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Abstract

The Currency of Status argues that human hierarchy is natural but not fixed. People form groups for protection and belonging, and within those groups status works as a social currency that determines who receives protection, resources, and respect. Drawing on research from evolutionary anthropology, primatology, developmental and social psychology, political science, epidemiology, and education, the book traces how status is gained through two routes, prestige and dominance, and how humans have long resisted would-be dominant individuals through ridicule, refusal, and exit. Part Two uses the schoolyard as a model, presenting bullying as a strategy for gaining status that depends on the reactions of bystanders, and reviewing evidence that school-wide programs can reduce bullying by about 20%. Part Three examines what happens when groups grow too large for members to know one another, showing how religious and political belief systems create legitimacy that is cheaper than force and can lead people to defend systems that harm them. It also shows how periods of crisis open the way to change. Part Four argues that freedom of choice is limited by position in a hierarchy, and that low status damages health directly, as the Whitehall studies of civil servants and experiments on rank in macaques both show. Part Five turns to solutions. Drawing on Boehm's research on egalitarian societies, Ostrom's design principles for governing shared resources, and evidence on guided active learning, it proposes that hierarchies can be checked, governance can be distributed, and education can build the skills that self-government requires. Each chapter includes counterevidence, including failed replications, contested findings, and the limits of extending small-group research to whole societies. The book concludes, with Havel's account of the greengrocer, that the promise of protection must be tested continually, and that refusal by ordinary people acting together remains the oldest and most important check on power.

Keywords: status, hierarchy, dominance, prestige, bullying, legitimacy, system justification, self-governance, education

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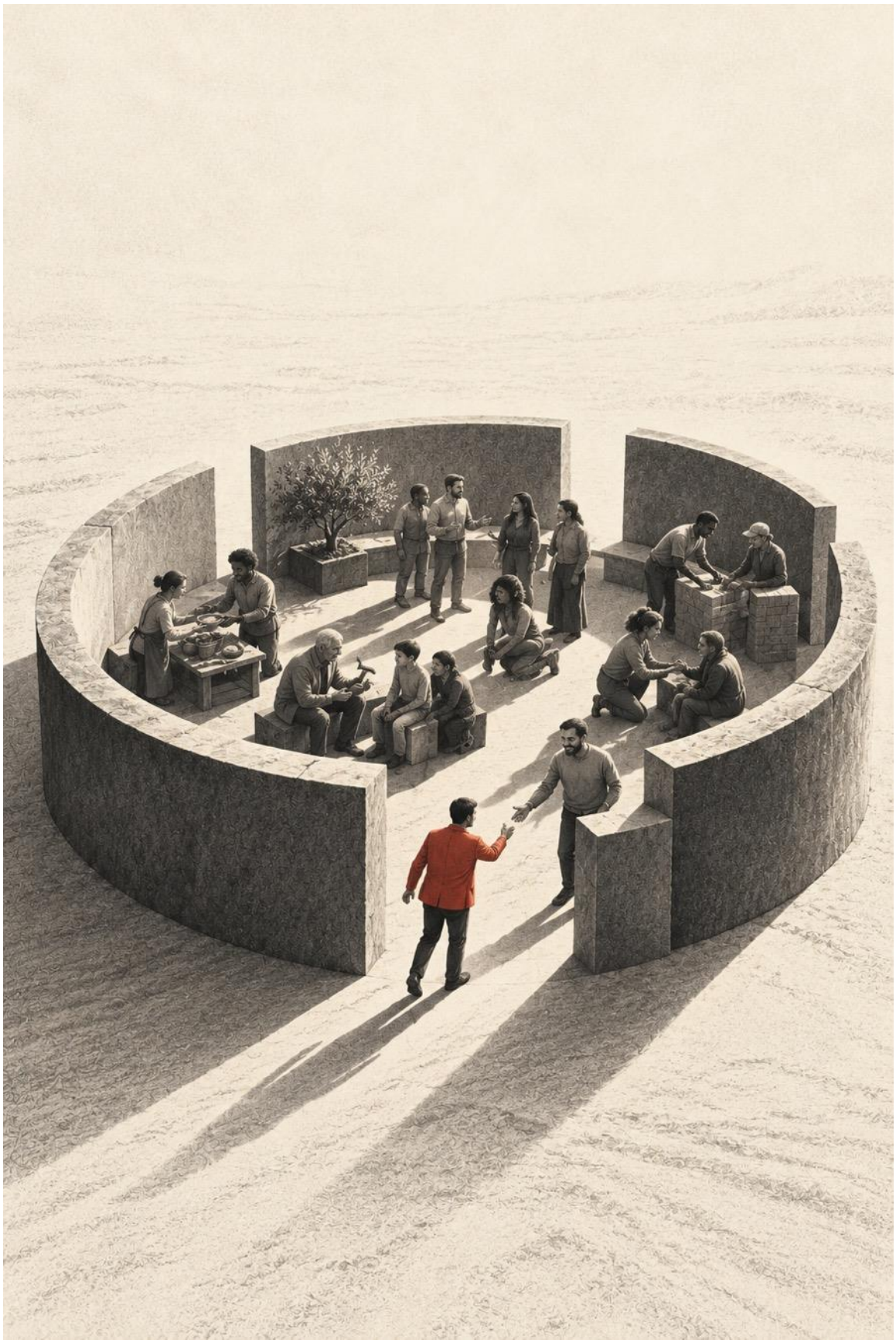
Part One: The Roots of Hierarchy



Chapter 1: Why We Need Groups

Every argument in this book begins with a simple fact: human beings cannot survive alone. Before there were kings, churches, or schools, there were small groups of people who depended on one another for food, safety, and knowledge. This chapter proposes that the need for protection and belonging is the foundation on which all later forms of hierarchy are built. If we want to understand why people accept leaders, defend institutions, and compete for standing, we have to start with why they need a group in the first place.

A group, in this sense, is more than a collection of people. It is a system of mutual dependence in which members provide each other with physical protection, shared resources, emotional connection, and accumulated know-how. Protection here means more than defense against predators or enemies; it includes the security of knowing that someone will help when you are sick, hungry, or threatened. Belonging is the sense that you are recognized as a member and that your place is secure. These two needs, protection and belonging, are the raw materials from which status systems are later made.

Joseph Henrich's The Secret of Our Success makes the strongest case that human survival depends on groups for knowledge, not just numbers. Henrich (2016) argues that humans are a cultural species: we rely on techniques for finding food, processing plants, making tools, and avoiding danger that were developed over generations and that no individual could invent alone. His best-known illustration is the Burke and Wills expedition of 1860–1861, in which well-equipped European explorers died of starvation in the Australian interior while the local Yandruwandha people lived in the same area. The explorers had food in front of them, a seed called nardoo, but did not know the traditional preparation that made it safe and nourishing. Survival depended on knowledge held by a community.

Robert Sapolsky's Behave adds a biological view. Sapolsky (2017) explains behavior across many timescales, from the hormones and brain activity of the moment to childhood experience, culture, and evolutionary history. His approach shows that social behavior, including our sensitivity to rank and belonging, has deep roots in our biology. At the same time, he repeatedly shows that biology does not dictate behavior; it creates tendencies that interact with environment and culture. That balance matters for this book: the need for groups is part of human nature, but how groups are organized is not fixed.

Sapolsky's own field research provides a striking example of that flexibility. In a troop of wild baboons in Kenya that he studied for many years, the most aggressive males died after eating contaminated meat from a tourist lodge's garbage dump. The surviving troop became noticeably less aggressive, with more grooming and less bullying of low-ranking members, and this calmer culture persisted for years even as new males joined the troop (Sapolsky & Share, 2004). If even baboon hierarchies can shift when conditions change, human groups, with their far greater capacity for culture and choice, should be capable of change as well.

The need for belonging is also visible in how strongly people react to being excluded. Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland (2015), whose review is central to Chapter 2, found that people's well-

being, self-esteem, and mental and physical health appear to depend partly on the standing they are given by others. A person who is pushed to the edge of a group loses not just company but security. For most of human history, exclusion could mean death, which helps explain why social rejection still feels so threatening even in modern settings where physical survival is not at stake.

There are limits to this argument. Showing that people need groups does not show that they need rulers, permanent ranks, or a fixed social order. Many of the most important human groups, such as families, friendships, and small work teams, function through cooperation that is not organized as a strict hierarchy. Readers who are skeptical of evolutionary explanations will also be watching for any move from "this behavior has biological roots" to "this behavior is natural and therefore justified." Explaining where a tendency comes from is not the same as approving of it, and this book does not claim otherwise.

Consider, as an illustration, a new teacher arriving at a school. In the first weeks, the teacher learns which colleagues share materials, who knows how to handle a difficult parent, and which unwritten rules govern the staff room. The teacher's success depends less on individual talent than on access to this shared knowledge and on being accepted by colleagues. A teacher who is excluded, even politely, quickly discovers how much harder the work becomes. The same pattern Henrich describes in the Australian desert appears, in miniature, in every workplace.

Taken together, these sources support a clear starting claim: humans depend on groups for protection, knowledge, and belonging, and this dependence is old, deep, and partly biological. But the same research also shows flexibility. Henrich's cultural learning, Sapolsky's timescales, and the changing baboon troop all suggest that the way groups are organized can change. The need for a group is fixed; the shape of the group is not. That distinction will matter throughout the book.

This chapter has argued that dependence on the group is the starting point of human social life. But dependence creates a question: if everyone needs the group, how does the group decide who gets more of its protection, attention, and resources? The answer, developed in Chapter 2, is status, the system of recognition through which groups distribute their benefits unequally.

Summary: Chapter 1 starts from a basic fact: people cannot survive alone. For most of human history, safety, food, and knowledge came through small groups. Belonging was a matter of survival, not a luxury. Drawing on Henrich's work on cultural learning and Sapolsky's research on the biology of social life, the chapter argues that the need for protection and belonging is the foundation of every later hierarchy. Wanting to belong makes people willing to accept leaders, follow rules, and compete for a place, and that sets up the book's study of status.

Discussion Questions:

1. If belonging was once a matter of survival, how much of that instinct still shapes our choices today, even when we could physically survive alone?
2. What groups do you depend on most, and what would you give up to stay in them?
3. Can the need to belong make people easier to control? Where have you seen this happen?
4. Is a group that protects its members also bound to create some kind of ranking among them? Why or why not?

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Chapter 2: Status as Social Currency

If Chapter 1 established that people need groups, this chapter examines how groups divide what they offer. The central claim is that status functions as a social currency. Recognition from others can be earned, saved, spent, and lost, and it can be converted into protection, opportunity, and freedom of action. Understanding status as a currency helps explain why people compete for it so intensely and why its unequal distribution shapes so much of social life.

Status needs a careful definition. In the research literature, status is the respect, admiration, and voluntary deference a person receives from others (Anderson et al., 2015). It is different from power, which is control over resources or other people, and from wealth, which is material possession. A respected teacher may have high status but little power; a wealthy employer may have power but little respect. Treating these as separate helps prevent the theory from explaining everything, and therefore nothing.

The strongest research foundation is Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland's (2015) review in Psychological Bulletin, which examined decades of studies to test whether the desire for status is a fundamental human motive. The authors found that people's subjective well-being, self-esteem, and mental and physical health appear to depend on the status they are given. People vigilantly watch the status dynamics around them, try to appear socially valuable, prefer settings where they can achieve higher standing, and react strongly when their status is threatened. The pattern held across differences in culture, gender, age, and personality, which supports the view that the desire for status is broadly human.

Follow-up research suggests the desire is also competitive. In a paper titled "Striving for Superiority," researchers at Berkeley found that participants in a laboratory experiment (n = 226) felt better when they alone had high status than when everyone had equal status, and that participants in a national survey (n = 715) preferred having higher status than others even if it meant everyone had lower status in absolute terms (Anderson et al., n.d.). If this finding holds, status is not only about being respected; it is about being respected more than others. That competitive quality helps explain why status systems so easily become hierarchies.

Will Storr's The Status Game offers a more accessible version of the same idea. Storr (2021) argues that human social life can be understood as a set of overlapping "games" in which people seek standing, and he distinguishes games based on dominance, virtue, and success. His examples, drawn from religious groups, workplaces, online communities, and political movements, help show how status can be earned in very different ways depending on what a group values. For this book, Storr's framework is useful mainly as a bridge to general readers; the empirical weight rests on the research literature.

The currency metaphor becomes concrete when we ask what status actually buys. In most groups, higher standing brings the benefit of the doubt when mistakes happen, a voice in decisions, protection when conflict arises, and access to opportunities that are never formally announced. Lower standing often brings the reverse: greater scrutiny, less forgiveness, and exclusion from informal networks. Like money, status can be inherited, accumulated, and

converted into other goods; unlike money, it is granted by other people and can be withdrawn quickly.

There are important limits to this framework. Anderson and colleagues argue that status is a fundamental motive, not the only motive. People also act out of love, conscience, curiosity, attachment, and fear. If every kind act is reinterpreted as a status strategy, the theory becomes impossible to test, because nothing could ever count against it. A more careful position is that status is one powerful currency among several, and that it often interacts with, rather than replaces, other human motives.

As an illustration, imagine two teachers at the same school who propose the same new policy at a staff meeting. One has taught there for twenty years and is widely respected; the other was hired last year. The respected teacher's idea is discussed seriously and adopted; the newer teacher's idea is politely ignored. The content of the proposal was identical. What differed was the status each person could spend. This is the currency of status at work: it determines whose voice counts.

The research supports treating status as a real and important social currency. People care about it, monitor it, compete for it, and suffer when they lack it. The currency is also exchangeable: it can be converted into protection, opportunity, and freedom of action. At the same time, the strongest research keeps status distinct from power and wealth, and it does not claim that status explains every human action. The chapter's position is that status is central, but not total.

If status is a currency, the next question is how people earn it. Not everyone reaches the top in the same way. Some people are given status freely because others value their skills; others take it by making people afraid. Chapter 3 examines these two very different routes to rank and why the difference matters.

Chapter 2: Status as Social Currency

Summary: Chapter 2 argues that status works like a currency. Status here means the respect, admiration, and voluntary deference a person receives. It can be earned, saved, spent, and lost, and it can be turned into protection, opportunity, and a voice in decisions. Anderson and colleagues' review of decades of research suggests that wanting status is a basic human motive tied to well-being and health, and later work suggests people often want more status than others, not just enough. The chapter keeps status separate from power and wealth. It also warns that status is one strong motive among several, not the explanation for everything people do.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a time when someone's ideas were taken seriously, or ignored, because of who they were and not what they said. What does that show about status as a currency?
2. Status is granted by others and can be withdrawn quickly. How does that make it different from money?
3. Would you rather be respected in a group of equals or ranked highest in an unequal group? Why do you think research finds that many people choose the second?
4. Where is the line between healthy ambition and harmful status-seeking?

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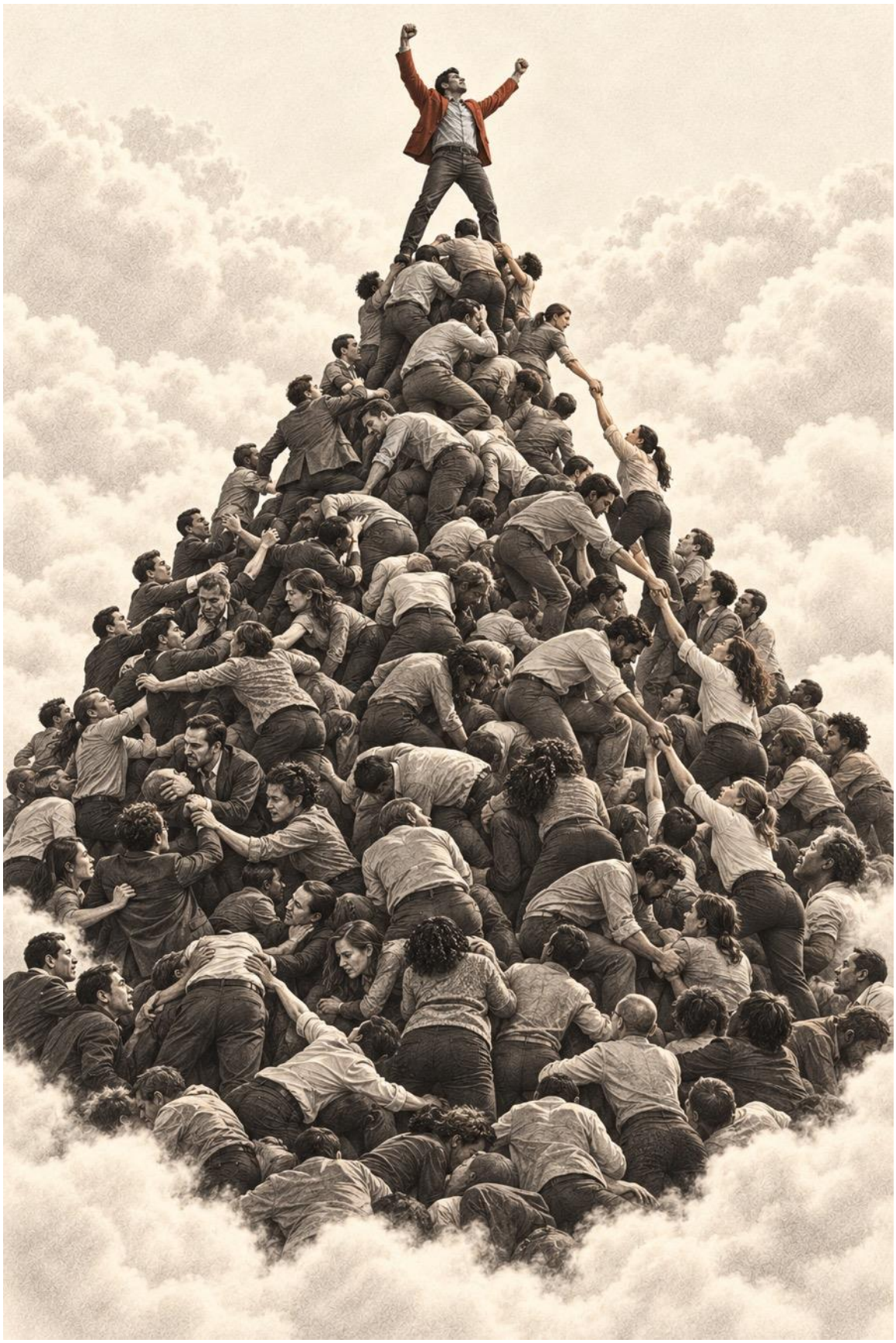

Chapter 3: Two Roads to the Top

Chapter 2 argued that status is a currency people compete for. This chapter argues that there are two fundamentally different ways to acquire it, and that the route a person takes shapes how they hold power and how others respond to them. One route is dominance: gaining influence through fear and intimidation. The other is prestige: gaining influence because others value your knowledge or skill. Both can work, but they create very different kinds of groups.

These terms come from evolutionary and social psychology. Dominance is the use of force, threat, or intimidation to induce fear and make others defer. Prestige is influence that is freely given to people whose expertise or know-how others want to learn from. Henrich and his colleagues have argued that prestige is especially important in humans because we depend so heavily on learning from skilled people, a point that connects directly to the cultural learning discussed in Chapter 1 (Henrich, 2016).

The key study is Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, and Henrich's (2013) "Two Ways to the Top." In the first study, 191 university students were placed in groups of four to six strangers and asked to complete a survival task called "Lost on the Moon," ranking items by their usefulness after a crash landing. Group members and outside observers then rated each person's dominance, prestige, and influence, and the researchers measured how much each person's private ranking shaped the group's final decision. Both dominance and prestige independently predicted influence, both as rated by others and as measured by actual effect on the group's answer.

The most revealing finding concerns likability. People who used a prestige strategy were liked; people who used a dominance strategy were not well liked, yet they were still influential (Cheng et al., 2013). In a second study, 59 participants watched short video clips of the groups while an eye tracker recorded where they looked. Both dominant and prestigious individuals drew more visual attention than others. In other words, people watch the powerful whether they admire them or fear them.

Frans de Waal's Chimpanzee Politics shows that the line between force and cooperation exists in our closest relatives too. Studying a chimpanzee colony at Arnhem Zoo in the Netherlands, de Waal (2007) documented how rank depended not just on physical strength but on alliances, reconciliation, and coalition-building. Males rose and fell depending on whom they could recruit as allies. Power struggles in the colony eventually turned violent: in 1980 a former alpha male named Luit was fatally injured in an attack by two rivals who had formed a coalition against him. Even in a hierarchy that looks physical, rank rests on social relationships.

The dominance-prestige distinction also appears in schools, which sets up Part Two of this book. Students who bully can be seen as popular even when they are not liked, a pattern discussed in Chapter 5 (Sijtsema et al., 2009). The parallel with Cheng's finding is striking: in both the laboratory and the schoolyard, influence and affection can come apart. A person can be powerful without being admired.

There are limits to these findings. Cheng's study used students in a short laboratory task, and the behavioral measure of influence was weaker than the rating-based measures. Real hierarchies last for years, and it is not clear that dominance works as well over long periods as it does in a twenty-minute task. De Waal's chimpanzee observations are illustrative, but readers should be careful about applying primate behavior directly to human institutions. The two roads are also rarely separate in real life: a person can begin with prestige and later use their position to intimidate.

As an illustration, consider a workplace with two managers. The first earned her position by solving technical problems no one else could solve; people seek her advice and follow her willingly. The second earned his position by making colleagues afraid to disagree with him; people follow him because the cost of resistance is high. Both have influence. But if each left the company tomorrow, the first would be missed and the second would not. The difference is not whether they hold power, but how.

The evidence supports a clear distinction between dominance and prestige as two viable routes to influence. Both work, at least in the short term, but they produce different relationships between leaders and followers: one based on admiration, the other on fear. This distinction allows the book to avoid two oversimplifications: that all hierarchy is coercion, and that all leadership is earned. Some hierarchies rest on respect, others on fear, and many on a shifting mix of both.

If dominance is one natural road to the top, it raises an obvious question: why don't the most aggressive people always end up in charge? Chapter 4 argues that humans also have a natural capacity to resist domination, and that for most of human history, small groups actively kept would-be bullies in check.

Chapter 3: Two Roads to the Top

Summary: Chapter 3 identifies two different routes to rank: dominance, which works through fear and intimidation, and prestige, which comes freely to people whose skill or knowledge others value. In Cheng and colleagues' 2013 study of 191 students working in small groups, both strategies predicted influence. But only prestige made people liked. De Waal's observations of chimpanzees show that even physical hierarchies rest on alliances. The chapter warns that laboratory tasks are short and that real leaders often mix both strategies. Still, the distinction lets the book avoid two oversimplifications: that all hierarchy is coercion, and that all leadership is earned.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a leader you have followed willingly and one you followed out of fear. How did each one's influence feel different to you?
2. Why might dominant people stay influential even when they are not liked?
3. Can a person start on the road of prestige and slide into dominance? What causes that shift?
4. Which kind of leadership does your school, workplace, or community reward most often, and how can you tell?

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Chapter 4: The Natural Pushback

Chapter 3 showed that dominance is a viable road to rank. This chapter argues that it is only half of the story. Human beings also have a natural capacity to resist domination, and for most of our history, small groups actively prevented aggressive individuals from taking control. Hierarchy is natural, but so is the collective effort to keep it in check. This chapter proposes that the tension between these two tendencies, the drive to dominate and the will to resist it, is the engine of human political life.

The anthropologist Christopher Boehm gave this tension a name. In his 1993 article in Current Anthropology, he described a "reverse dominance hierarchy," in which "the rank and file itself manages to dominate" rather than being dominated (Boehm, 1993, p. 237). In egalitarian societies, he argued, equality is not the absence of hierarchy. It is a special kind of hierarchy in which the group, acting together, keeps its most assertive members under control.

Boehm's evidence came from a cross-cultural survey of about 200 politically independent small-scale societies drawn from the ethnographic record. Most reports lacked enough detail, but 48 societies provided solid evidence of people deliberately controlling their leaders. These came from every inhabited continent and included foragers, herders, gardeners, and even some weak chiefdoms (Boehm, 1993). The breadth of the sample matters: it suggests that resistance to domination is not a product of one environment or way of life.

The specific methods Boehm documented range from mild to extreme. They include public opinion, criticism, ridicule, disobedience, removing a leader from office, deserting him, exile, and, in the most serious cases, execution. Among the Hadza of Tanzania, when a man tried to persuade others to work for him, people openly showed that they found his efforts amusing. Among the Iban of Borneo, if a chief tried to give a command, no one listened. Boehm found that executions of persistent dominators were reported in 11 of the 48 societies, and that the most common reasons for sanctioning were being too aggressive (13 cases) and trying to dominate others as a leader (14 cases) (Boehm, 1993).

Importantly, these societies did not reject leadership. They valued leaders who were generous, wise, fair, good speakers, and skilled at resolving conflict, as long as those leaders remained "first among equals." Boehm (1993) found that when a society's political ethos was described clearly, it was invariably of this kind. He also observed a consistent ambivalence: people respected the role of leader but watched the person filling it closely. Leaders who understood this simply stayed in line, which is why such control often left little trace in ethnographic records.

Boehm's later book, Hierarchy in the Forest, extended the argument into evolutionary history. Boehm (1999) suggested that humans inherited tendencies toward dominance and submission from a common ancestor shared with the African great apes, but that early humans developed a capacity to form large coalitions that could restrain dominant individuals. He proposed that by about 40,000 years ago, essentially all human societies practiced egalitarian behavior, and usually did so successfully (Boehm, 1993). Equality, in this view, was not an accident of circumstance. It was a political achievement.

There are limits to Boehm's evidence. His survey was informal and qualitative, as he acknowledged, and it relied on older ethnographies that often focused on adult men and underreported women's political roles. Boehm also noted that these societies were egalitarian only among adult political equals; children, young people, and often married women within households could be controlled firmly. Some anthropologists question how far modern foraging societies can stand in for prehistoric ones. The argument is strongest as evidence that resistance to domination is widespread and deliberate, not as a complete picture of early human life.

Consider, as an illustration, a teacher's lounge where one colleague begins dominating meetings, interrupting others and taking credit for shared work. No formal rule stops him. But over several weeks, colleagues begin rolling their eyes when he speaks, quietly meeting without him, and declining to support his proposals. Eventually, he either moderates his behavior or finds himself isolated. No one voted, and no one was punished officially. The group simply used the oldest tools Boehm describes: ridicule, withdrawal, and collective refusal.

The evidence supports a revised version of the book's thesis. Hierarchy is natural, but so is resistance to it. Humans are not simply dominant or submissive; we are capable of both, and we have long used social pressure to keep dominance within limits. This means the question is not whether hierarchy will appear, but whether the group retains the ability to restrain it. Boehm's work shows that, in small groups, it usually could.

But Boehm also noted that this ability weakens as groups change. Settled life, larger populations, outside threats, and charismatic or supernatural authority could all undermine reverse dominance (Boehm, 1993). Before examining that transition in Part Three, the book turns to a setting where these dynamics can be observed directly in modern life: the school. Chapter 5 examines bullying as a small-scale model of how status, aggression, and group response interact.

Chapter 4: The Natural Pushback

Summary: Chapter 4 argues that humans have a natural capacity to resist domination, not only to seek it. Boehm's survey of small-scale societies found 48 with clear evidence of people deliberately controlling their leaders. They used ridicule, criticism, disobedience, desertion, removal, and, in extreme cases, execution. Boehm called this a "reverse dominance hierarchy," in which the group as a whole controls its most ambitious members. The chapter notes that Boehm's evidence is informal, relies on older ethnographies, and often leaves out women's political roles. Its main point stands: equality in small groups was a political achievement, and the ability to keep it depends on the conditions the group lives in.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you seen a group use ridicule, withdrawal, or quiet refusal to keep someone from dominating? Did it work?
2. Boehm argues that equality is "a special kind of hierarchy." What do you think he means, and do you agree?
3. Is social pressure a fair way to control behavior, or can it become a form of bullying itself?
4. What modern conditions make it harder for ordinary people to push back against those who seek too much power?

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Note: Confirm the page number for the quoted phrase from Boehm (1993) against the published article.



Chapter 5: Bullying as a Status Strategy

Part One argued that people compete for status, that dominance is one road to it, and that small groups have long pushed back against those who dominate. This chapter applies those ideas to a setting nearly every reader has known firsthand: the school. The central claim is that much bullying is not random cruelty or a simple failure of self-control. It is often a strategy for gaining and keeping status within a peer group. If that is true, the schoolyard becomes a small, observable model of how hierarchy works in society at large.

Researchers generally define bullying as aggressive behavior that is intentional, repeated over time, and carried out within a relationship where there is an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). The power imbalance is what separates bullying from ordinary conflict between equals. That imbalance may be physical, but it is often social: the student who bullies is frequently more popular, more connected, or more confident than the student who is targeted. Bullying can be physical, verbal, relational (such as spreading rumors or excluding someone), or carried out online.

The scale of the problem was documented in Nansel and colleagues' (2001) national study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Surveying 15,686 U.S. students in grades 6 through 10 in 1998, the researchers found that 29.9% reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying: 13.0% as bullies, 10.6% as targets, and 6.3% as both. This is the source of the roughly 30% figure in this book's outline. The figure includes students who bully as well as those who are bullied, so it measures involvement in the system, not victimization alone.

More recent federal data suggest the problem has declined but remains significant. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), 19.2% of students ages 12 to 18 reported being bullied at school during the 2021–22 school year, down from 28% in 2010–11. Among students who were bullied, 22% reported being bullied online or by text. The decline is encouraging, but prevalence figures depend heavily on how questions are asked, which years are measured, and whether perpetrators are counted alongside victims.

The research most relevant to this book asks why students bully. Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, and Salmivalli (2009) studied 502 Finnish students, ages 10–11 and 14–15, in 22 school classes. They found that students who bullied placed importance on status goals, used proactive aggression (planned, goal-directed aggression rather than angry reaction), and were seen by classmates as popular. Yet the same bullies were just as rejected by classmates as the victims were. The authors concluded that being popular is not the same as being liked, and that the pursuit of status through bullying appeared to grow stronger in early adolescence.

Sociologists Robert Faris and Diane Felmlee (2011) reached a similar conclusion using social network data from 3,722 students in grades 8 through 10 at 19 North Carolina schools. They found that "aggression is generally not a maladjusted reaction typical of the socially marginal; instead, aggression is intrinsic to status and escalates with increases in peer status until the pinnacle of the social hierarchy is attained" (p. 48). Students near the top of the hierarchy, around the 98th percentile, were 28% more aggressive than students at the very bottom and 40% more

aggressive than the small group at the very top (Chalkbeat, 2011). As Faris explained, students at the bottom lack the social power to be aggressive, while those at the top "have all that power, but don't need to use it" (Chalkbeat, 2011).

This connects directly to Chapter 3. Like the dominant participants in Cheng and colleagues' (2013) laboratory groups, students who bully can gain influence without being liked. The schoolyard reproduces the two roads to status: some students are looked up to for their skills or kindness, while others are watched and obeyed because they are feared. The Faris and Felmlee findings also suggest that bullying is most intense in the middle and upper-middle of the hierarchy, where students are still climbing and still have rivals to defeat. Aggression, in this view, is a tool for competition, not a sign of social failure.

There are important limits to the status explanation. Not all bullying is strategic. Some students who bully have experienced abuse at home, struggle with emotional regulation, or are themselves targets, as the 6.3% "bully-victim" group in Nansel's data shows; that group often has the worst outcomes and does not fit the picture of a confident social climber. In Sijtsema's study, some predicted links between status goals and bullying held only for certain ages or for boys, and Faris and Felmlee found that aggression did not reliably increase a student's later status overall. Both studies also rely on surveys and peer nominations, which can be shaped by reputation. Status is a powerful explanation for much bullying, but not a complete one.

As an illustration, imagine a seventh grader who moves to a new school. Within weeks, she notices that one student mocks others in front of a group and that classmates laugh along, even those who seem uncomfortable. That student is invited to every party, but few people describe her as a friend. The new student learns quickly that the safest position is to stay on the bully's good side. Nothing in this picture requires the bully to be uncontrolled or unhappy; she may be acting rationally within the status system she is in, exactly as Faris and Felmlee's research would predict.

The evidence supports treating bullying, in many cases, as a status strategy rather than simply a behavioral problem. Students who bully frequently gain visibility and perceived popularity, and aggression rises as students climb the social ladder. At the same time, some students who bully are struggling themselves, and an approach that sees only strategy will miss them. The most balanced view is that bullying lives at the intersection of individual need and group reward. If bullying is often a performance for status, then the performance needs an audience. Chapter 6 turns from the student who bullies to the students who watch, and argues that the reaction of bystanders, more than the bully alone, determines whether bullying pays off.

Chapter 5: Bullying as a Status Strategy

Summary: Chapter 5 applies the ideas of Part One to schools and argues that much bullying is a strategy for gaining and keeping status, not random cruelty or a failure of self-control. Research by Sijtsema and colleagues, and by Faris and Felmlee, links aggression to status goals and to students' positions in peer networks, with aggression often peaking among students who are climbing socially. National data show that bullying remains common. The chapter accepts that not all bullying is strategic. Some of it reflects trauma, impulsivity, or reactive aggression. But seeing much of it as a status strategy changes the question from "What is wrong with this child?" to "What is this behavior earning?"

Discussion Questions:

1. If bullying is often a status strategy, what exactly does the bully gain, and who gives it to them?
2. Why might aggression be highest among students who are rising socially rather than those already at the top?
3. How would school discipline change if adults treated bullying as goal-directed behavior and not just a character flaw?
4. Do adult workplaces have their own versions of status-driven bullying? What do they look like?

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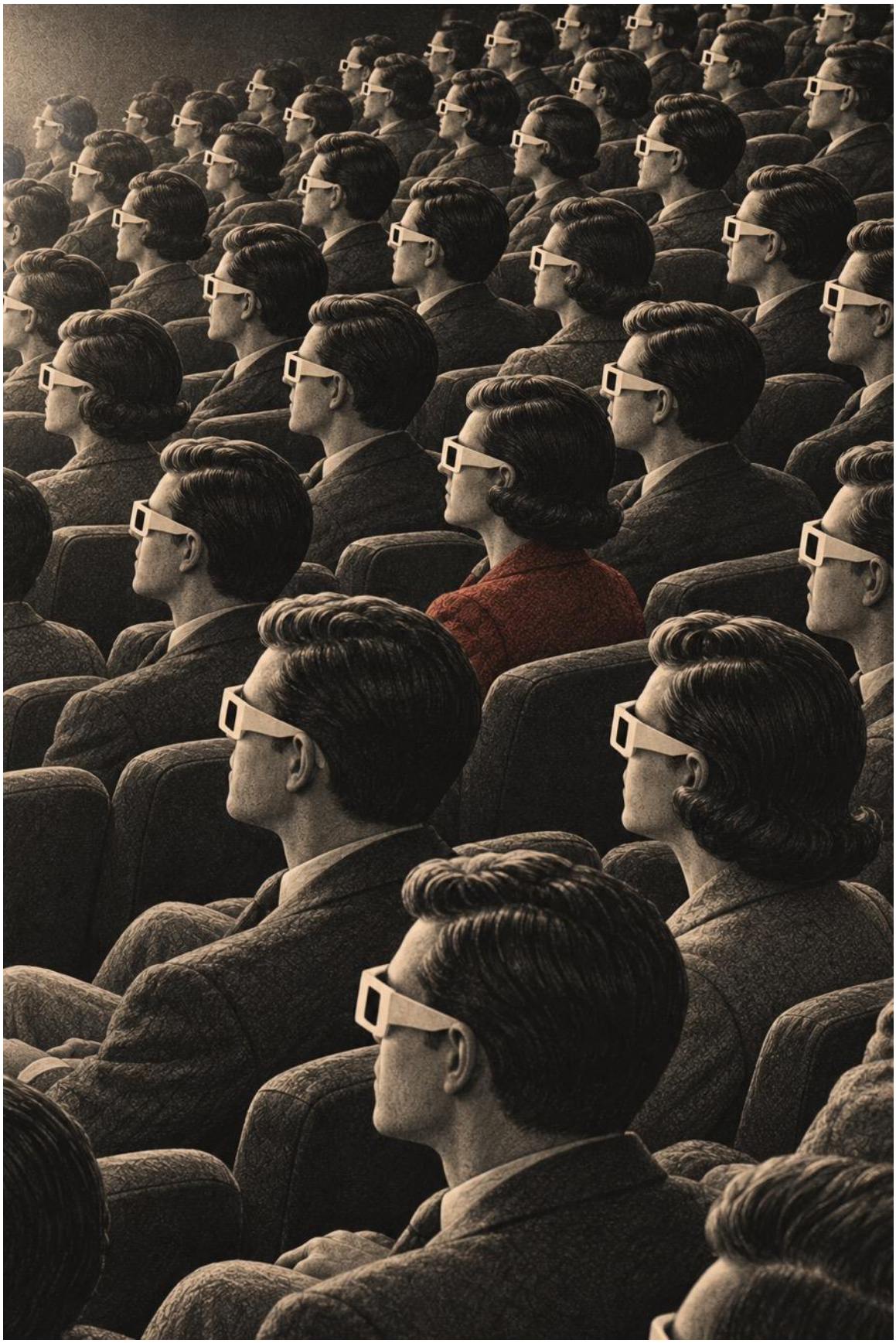

Chapter 6: The Role of the Audience

Chapter 5 argued that bullying is often a strategy for gaining status. This chapter argues that status cannot be gained alone; it must be granted by others. The central claim is that the audience, the classmates who laugh, watch, look away, or step in, is the real source of the bully's power. If the peer group stops rewarding cruelty, the strategy stops working. This shifts attention from the individual bully to the group, and it is the first point in the book where the problem of hierarchy becomes a problem of collective behavior.

The key idea is that bullying is a group process. Christina Salmivalli and her colleagues in Finland proposed that every student in a classroom has a role during bullying episodes, even those who never throw a punch or say an unkind word. Their framework identified six roles: the victim, the bully, the assistant who joins in, the reinforcer who laughs or cheers, the defender who supports the victim, and the outsider who stays away (Salmivalli et al., 1996). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) adopted a similar view in its major national review, treating bullying as a problem shaped by peers, schools, families, and communities rather than by individual students alone.

In their original study of 573 Finnish sixth graders, Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) were able to assign a participant role to 87% of students. The distribution was striking: 11.7% were victims and 8.2% were bullies, but 19.5% were reinforcers, 6.8% were assistants, 17.3% were defenders, and 23.7% were outsiders. The students who actively supported the bully, as assistants or reinforcers, outnumbered the bullies themselves by more than three to one. Boys were more often bullies, reinforcers, and assistants; girls were more often defenders and outsiders.

Observational research shows how much the audience matters in real time. Hawkins, Pepler, and Craig (2001) recorded children in grades 1 through 6 on Canadian school playgrounds and found that peers were present during 88% of bullying episodes but intervened in only 19%. Yet when peers did intervene, the majority of interventions (57%) were effective in stopping the bullying. Peers hold a great deal of potential power, but they rarely use it.

Salmivalli's research team then tested whether changing the audience could reduce bullying. Their KiVa program, developed for Finnish schools, focuses on bystanders: it teaches students to recognize their roles, builds empathy for victims, and gives them practical ways to support targeted classmates. In a randomized trial, 78 schools with 8,237 students in grades 4 through 6 were assigned to use KiVa or to continue as usual (Kärnä et al., 2011). After nine months, KiVa schools showed significant reductions in victimization and bullying, along with less reinforcing of bullies and greater confidence among students in their ability to defend victims. The program's developers estimated reductions of about 30% in victimization and 17% in bullying compared with control schools (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012).

This connects back to Boehm's work in Chapter 4. In egalitarian bands, the group restrained would-be dominators through ridicule, withdrawal, and refusal to cooperate. In a classroom, reinforcers and outsiders do the opposite: by laughing or staying silent, they reward dominance instead of checking it. Defenders play the role that Boehm's egalitarian coalitions played. KiVa

can be understood as a modern attempt to rebuild that coalition, turning silent outsiders into active defenders. The difference between a classroom where bullying flourishes and one where it fades may be whether defenders or reinforcers set the tone.

There are limits to the audience explanation. Bystanders often stay silent for understandable reasons: fear of becoming the next target, uncertainty about what to do, or the belief that adults will not help. Asking children to intervene can expose them to real risks, and Hawkins and colleagues (2001) found that nearly half of peer interventions were themselves aggressive. A large meta-analysis also found that one program element, "work with peers," was associated with an increase rather than a decrease in victimization, suggesting that peer-based approaches must be carefully designed (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). KiVa's results, while significant, were modest in size and were evaluated largely by its developers. Mobilizing the audience is powerful, but it is not simple.

As an illustration, picture a lunch table where one student makes a cruel joke about another. Three classmates laugh, two look at their phones, and one says quietly, "That's not funny." The joke-teller now faces a choice: the laughter rewards him, but the objection raises the cost. If two more students join the objection, the joke stops being a status win. The bully's power, in that moment, is being decided by the people around him.

The evidence strongly supports the view that the peer audience determines whether bullying pays off. Most students are neither bullies nor victims but participants in a social system that either rewards or restrains aggression. Observational studies show that bystanders are almost always present and that their intervention usually works, and a large randomized trial shows that changing bystander behavior can reduce bullying. This sharpens the book's thesis: status is not taken; it is granted, and what the group grants, it can also withhold. The challenge is creating conditions in which withholding it feels safe.

If the audience holds the key, then the next question is whether adults can change the whole system that shapes the audience. Chapter 7 examines school-wide programs, starting with the pioneering work of Dan Olweus, and asks what their mixed results reveal about changing systems rather than individuals.

Chapter 5: Bullying as a Status Strategy

Summary: Chapter 5 applies the ideas of Part One to schools and argues that much bullying is a strategy for gaining and keeping status, not random cruelty or a failure of self-control. Research by Sijtsema and colleagues, and by Faris and Felmlee, links aggression to status goals and to students' positions in peer networks, with aggression often peaking among students who are climbing socially. National data show that bullying remains common. The chapter accepts that not all bullying is strategic. Some of it reflects trauma, impulsivity, or reactive aggression. But seeing much of it as a status strategy changes the question from "What is wrong with this child?" to "What is this behavior earning?"

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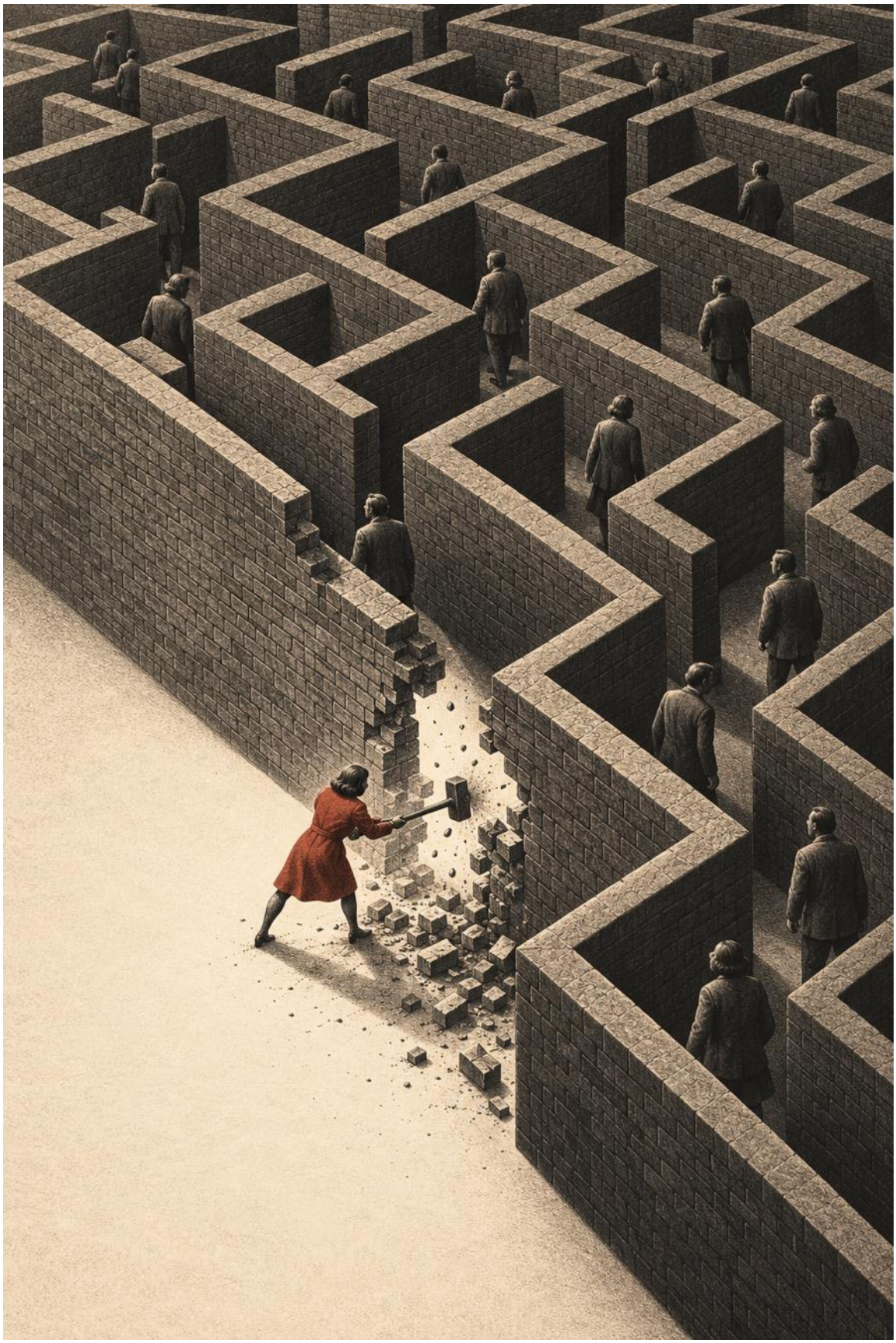

Chapter 7: Changing the System

Chapter 6 showed that bullying depends on an audience that rewards it. This chapter asks whether adults can change that audience by changing the system around it. The central claim is that the most effective responses to bullying treat it as a property of the whole school environment, not as a problem located inside individual children. The history of these efforts also offers a lesson for later chapters: systems can be changed, but the results are often smaller, slower, and less consistent than early success stories suggest.

The pioneer of this approach was the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus. His Bullying Prevention Program, described in Bullying at School, was built on the idea that the whole school must take responsibility. The program works at several levels at once: school-wide rules and supervision, classroom meetings where students discuss bullying, individual interventions with students who bully and are bullied, and involvement of parents and the community (Olweus, 1993). The goal is not just to punish bullies but to change norms so that bullying is no longer rewarded.

The early results were dramatic. In the first evaluation, carried out in Bergen, Norway, between 1983 and 1985, about 2,500 students in 42 schools participated. Olweus reported reductions of 50% or more in bully/victim problems after eight and twenty months, along with reductions in general antisocial behavior such as vandalism, fighting, and truancy (Olweus, 2003). These findings made the program internationally famous and helped launch the field of school bullying prevention.

Later evidence was more mixed. A subsequent Norwegian study in 1997–1998, involving about 3,200 students in 30 schools, found smaller reductions of roughly 21% to 38% (Olweus, 2003). A separate replication in the Rogaland region, led by Erling Roland with about 7,000 students ages 8 to 16, observed slight increases in bullying and in being bullied, although reviewers note that schools in the two projects received very different levels of support (Stevens et al., 2001). In the United States, a large evaluation in Pennsylvania followed 210 schools with 70,998 students at baseline. It found clear reductions across most grades, but the average absolute change was about 3 percentage points (Limber et al., 2018). Those results are meaningful, since thousands of students were spared bullying, but they are far from the 50% figure.

Meta-analyses help put these numbers in context. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) reviewed 44 rigorous evaluations of school-based programs and found that bullying decreased by an average of 20% to 23% and victimization by 17% to 20%. More intensive and longer programs worked better, as did those that included parent meetings, firm disciplinary methods, and improved playground supervision. An updated review of 100 evaluations found slightly smaller but still significant effects: reductions of about 19% to 20% in bullying perpetration and 15% to 16% in victimization (Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). Among the specific programs examined, evaluations of the Olweus program produced the largest effects on perpetration (Gaffney, Farrington, & Ttofi, 2019).

These results connect to the book's broader argument about systems. Olweus's program works not by changing individual temperament but by changing incentives: increasing supervision, making rules clear, and giving bystanders permission to act. It is, in effect, a modern attempt to rebuild what Boehm described in Chapter 4, a community that is willing and able to restrain those who try to dominate. Swearer, Espelage, and Napolitano (2009) reach a similar practical conclusion, arguing that schools must address the social ecology of bullying rather than relying on one-time assemblies or zero-tolerance rules. When these approaches work, they show that status systems can be redesigned.

There are significant limitations. Most of the strongest early results were evaluated by the program's developers, which raises questions about independent replication. Effects vary widely by country, school, and implementation quality. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) noted that evaluations conducted in Norway tended to show stronger effects than those conducted elsewhere. Even KiVa, the bystander-focused program that performed well in Finland (Chapter 6), showed no statistically significant effect on victimization in a randomized trial of 21 primary schools and more than 3,000 children in Wales; the researchers reported that lessons were shorter than recommended and that whole-school elements were implemented inconsistently (Axford et al., 2020). These differences suggest that a program's success depends heavily on context, including staff commitment, school culture, and broader social norms.

As an illustration, imagine two schools that adopt the same anti-bullying curriculum. In the first, the principal attends every training, teachers hold weekly class meetings, and playground supervision is increased. In the second, teachers receive a binder at the start of the year and never discuss it again. A year later, the first school reports fewer incidents; the second reports no change. The program was the same. What differed was whether the adults actually changed the system.

The evidence supports a cautious but hopeful conclusion. Bullying can be reduced by changing the systems around it, and programs that involve the whole school tend to work best. Across about 100 evaluations, the typical gain is a reduction of roughly one-fifth, not one-half, and it depends on careful, sustained implementation. For this book, that lesson is important: changing a status system is possible, but it requires sustained effort, not a single intervention, and the same program can succeed in one setting and fail in another.

A school is a relatively small community where adults can see much of what happens and can change rules directly. But what happens when groups grow so large that no one can see everything, and members no longer know one another? Part Three turns to this problem of scale, beginning in Chapter 8 with the question of how many people a human group can actually hold together.

Chapter 7: Changing the System

Summary: Chapter 7 asks whether adults can change the audience by changing the whole school environment. Meta-analyses by Ttofi, Farrington, and Gaffney found that school-based programs reduce bullying by roughly 19 to 20 percent on average. Whole-school models such as Olweus and KiVa work by changing peer norms and supporting defenders. Results vary, though. KiVa's strong results in Finland were weaker in a trial in Wales, and effects can fade when schools stop putting in the effort. The chapter's lesson for the rest of the book is that systems can be changed, but the change lasts only when the community keeps it going.

Discussion Questions:

1. A 20 percent reduction is meaningful but not complete. What would it take to go further?
2. Why might a program that works well in one country produce weaker results in another?
3. Who in a school has the most power to change peer norms: administrators, teachers, or students? Why?
4. What does the fading of program effects suggest about any effort to reform an institution?

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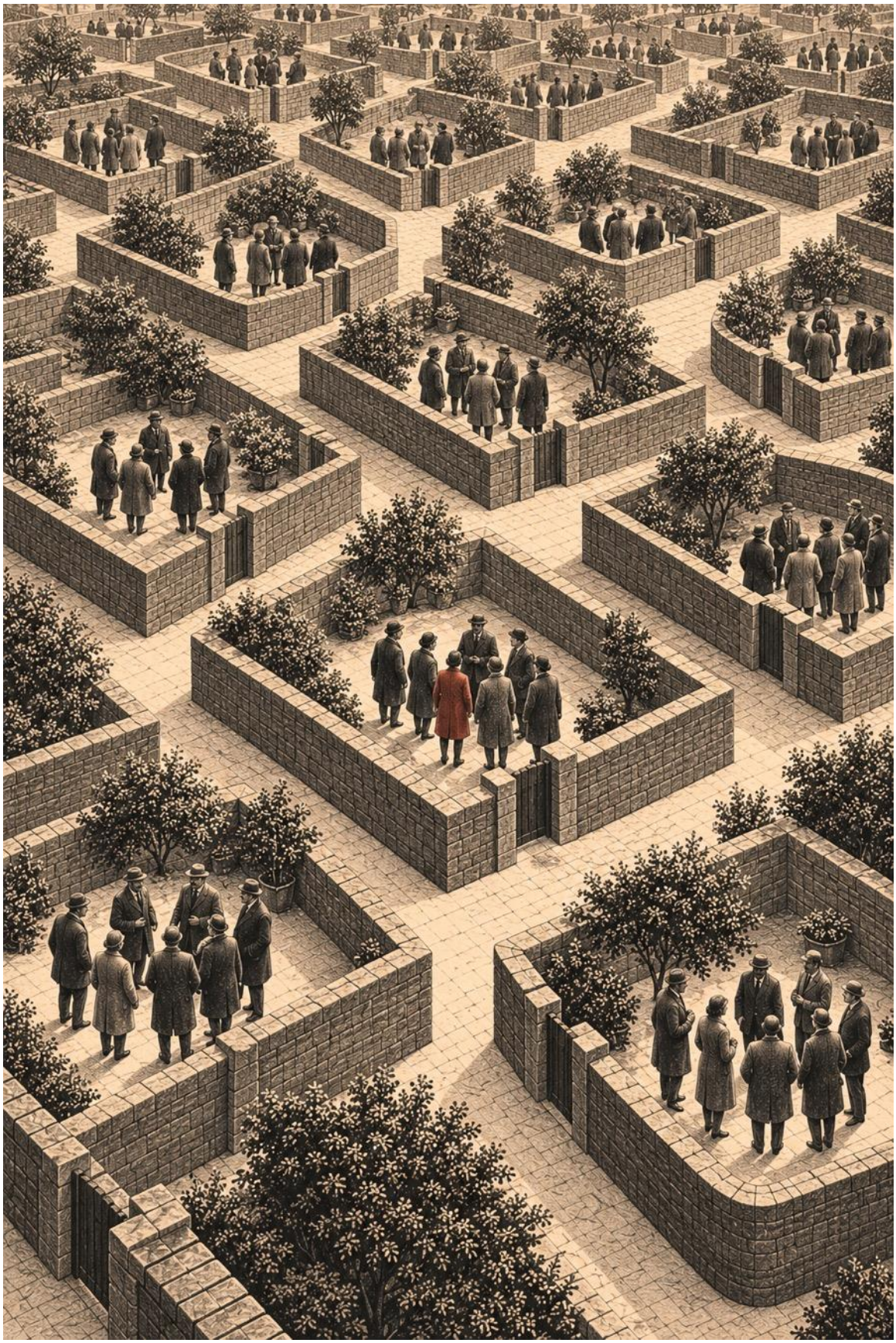

Chapter 8: Groups Too Big to Know Each Other

Part Two showed that bullying can be reduced when the community around it is able to see what is happening and respond. This chapter argues that this ability depends on scale. The informal tools that keep dominance in check, such as reputation, gossip, ridicule, and shared memory, work best when people know one another. As groups grow beyond that point, those tools weaken, and new methods of coordination must take their place. The central claim is that the move from small groups to large societies changes not only the size of hierarchy but its nature.

The problem can be stated simply. In a band of a few dozen people, everyone knows who is generous, who is lazy, and who is trying to dominate. Reputation spreads by direct observation and conversation, and anyone who misbehaves can be confronted face to face. In a city of a million people, no one can know more than a tiny fraction of the population. Strangers must cooperate without any personal history, and a would-be dominator can move among people who have never heard of his behavior. The tools Boehm described in Chapter 4 depend on everyone knowing everyone; scale removes that condition.

The best-known attempt to measure this limit is the anthropologist Robin Dunbar's work on group size. Dunbar (1992) compared the size of the neocortex, the part of the brain associated with complex thinking, with the size of social groups across primate species. Extending that relationship to humans, he predicted that people could maintain stable, personal relationships with roughly 150 others. He later developed the idea for general readers, arguing that numbers close to 150 appear repeatedly in human organization, from hunter-gatherer clans to farming villages and military units (Dunbar, 2010). The figure has become widely known as "Dunbar's number."

Dunbar and his colleagues have tested the idea in modern settings. In one study, Hill and Dunbar (2003) asked 43 people in Britain to record everyone they sent holiday cards to, a total of 2,984 cards. Counting everyone in the households that received cards, the average network size was 153.5 people, very close to Dunbar's prediction. The authors interpreted this as evidence that even in modern societies, where people could in principle know thousands of others, there may be a cognitive limit on how many meaningful relationships a person can maintain.

The most relevant evidence for this book comes from communities that deliberately split when they grow. The Hutterites, a communal Christian farming people in North America, form a new "daughter" colony when a colony grows too large. In an analysis of 97 such splits between 1880 and 1970, Dunbar and Sosis (2018) found that colonies divided at an average size of about 166 people. Dunbar has reported that Hutterites explain the practice by saying that once a colony grows beyond about 150, they "can't control the group by peer pressure alone" (Small, 2003). This is a striking parallel to Boehm's (1993) observation that egalitarian bands tended to split once they reached "just a few hundred persons." In both cases, people seem to recognize that informal social control works only up to a certain size.

The historian Yuval Noah Harari's Sapiens offers one account of how large societies overcame this limit. Harari (2015) argues that humans became able to cooperate in very large numbers because they could believe in shared stories, such as gods, nations, money, and laws, that exist only in collective imagination. Two strangers who share belief in the same god or the same currency can cooperate without knowing each other. If personal relationships cannot hold together a society of millions, shared stories can. This idea sets up Chapter 9, which examines belief as a tool for both coordination and control.

These claims face serious challenges. Lindenfors, Wartel, and Lind (2021) reanalyzed primate brain and group-size data using updated statistical methods and found that estimates of the human limit varied widely depending on the method, with averages between 69 and 109 or between 16 and 42. Their 95% confidence intervals were as wide as 4 to 520 people, which, they concluded, "imply that specifying any one number is futile" (p. 1). The holiday card study was also small and drawn from one culture. Harari's Sapiens, meanwhile, is a sweeping popular synthesis rather than a research study, and specialists have questioned some of its generalizations. The broad pattern that group size matters remains well supported, but the book should not treat 150 as a fixed law of nature.

As an illustration, compare a small rural school with a large urban high school. In the rural school, the principal knows every student by name, and a student who bullies is quickly identified by teachers, parents, and peers who all know one another. In the urban school, with thousands of students, a student who bullies can move between social circles, and many adults never learn what is happening. The large school must rely on formal rules, reporting systems, and shared values to do what personal knowledge did in the small one. It is no accident that many large schools try to recreate small communities through "houses," advisory groups, or smaller learning communities.

Taken together, the evidence supports the general claim that scale changes how groups manage hierarchy, even if no single number marks the breaking point. Dunbar's research, the holiday card study, and the Hutterite colonies all point to a practical limit on how large a group can grow while relying on personal knowledge and peer pressure. Boehm's egalitarian bands show the same pattern from a different angle. Critics are right that the exact number is uncertain, but the underlying problem is real: as groups grow, the informal checks on dominance weaken, and impersonal systems such as rules, institutions, and shared beliefs must take their place. Those systems can coordinate millions of people, but they can also be shaped by those at the top.

If personal knowledge cannot hold large groups together, something else must. Chapter 9 examines one of the most powerful substitutes in human history: shared belief, in the form of religion and political ideals, and the ways it can both bind people together and keep them in their place.

Chapter 8: Groups Too Big to Know Each Other

Summary: Chapter 8 argues that the informal tools that limit dominance, such as reputation, gossip, ridicule, and shared memory, work best in groups small enough for people to know one another. Dunbar's research suggests a natural limit of about 150 stable relationships. Hill and Dunbar's work on social networks, and Dunbar and Sosis's study of community sizes, support the idea that there are natural layers in human group size. Critics such as Lindenfors and colleagues argue that the number itself is statistically weak. Even so, the larger point holds: as groups grow past personal knowledge, they need new tools to coordinate, and those tools can either restrain power or concentrate it.

Discussion Questions:

1. How many people do you truly know well enough to trust? Does that number feel close to Dunbar's estimate?
2. What happens to accountability when people no longer know each other personally?
3. If the exact number of 150 is disputed, does the larger argument about scale still hold? Why?
4. What tools do large schools, companies, or cities use to replace personal reputation, and do they work?

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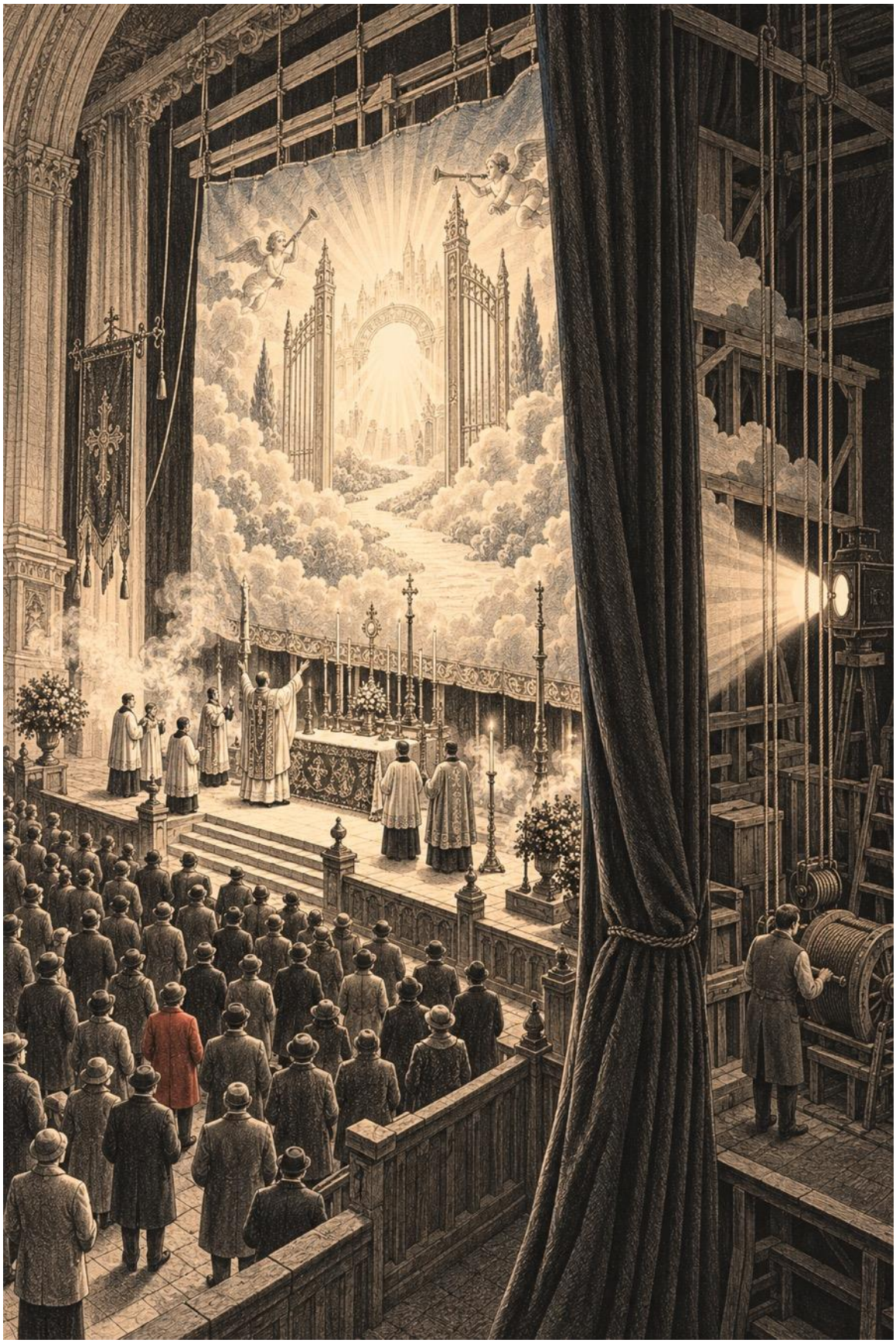

Chapter 9: Belief as a Tool

Chapter 8 argued that large societies need a substitute for the personal knowledge that holds small groups together. This chapter argues that shared belief, especially religious and political belief, is one of the most important of those substitutes. The central claim has two parts. First, shared beliefs allow strangers to cooperate on a massive scale. Second, the same beliefs can be shaped and used by elites to make existing hierarchies seem natural, sacred, or inevitable. Belief, in other words, is both social glue and a tool of power.

Two traditions of thought are useful here. The first comes from evolutionary and cultural psychology, which asks how beliefs help groups cooperate. The second comes from political theory, especially the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who asked how ruling groups maintain control without constant force. Gramsci used the term "hegemony" to describe a situation in which the dominant group's values become accepted as common sense, so that people consent to the existing order rather than simply submitting to it (Gramsci, 1971). Put together, these traditions explain both why belief works and whom it works for.

The psychologist Ara Norenzayan's Big Gods presents the cooperation side of the argument. Norenzayan (2013) proposes that belief in powerful, watchful, moralizing gods helped large groups of strangers trust one another, because believers assumed that everyone was being watched and would be punished for cheating. Experimental research supports part of this idea. Purzycki and colleagues (2016) studied 591 people in eight diverse communities around the world using economic games in which participants allocated coins. The more participants rated their gods as punitive and as knowing human thoughts and actions, the more coins they allocated to distant strangers who shared their religion, compared with themselves and local co-religionists.

Historical data complicate the timeline. Using Bayesian phylogenetic methods with 96 Austronesian cultures, Watts and colleagues (2015) found that belief in broad supernatural punishment, from ancestral spirits and other agents, appeared to help political complexity emerge, while moralizing high gods tended to appear after complex societies had already formed. Belief in moralizing high gods was present in only 6 of the 96 cultures. A larger global study using the Seshat historical databank reached a similar conclusion, reporting that moralizing gods appeared only after societies reached about one million people (Whitehouse et al., 2019). That paper was retracted, however, after critics showed that 61% of its data points on moralizing gods were missing values that had been recoded as absences; when only the existing data were analyzed, the finding reversed (Beheim et al., 2021). The authors maintain that corrected analyses still support their conclusion, so the order of gods and complexity remains genuinely contested.

Other research points more directly to belief as a tool of control. In a study of 93 Austronesian cultures, Watts, Sheehan, Atkinson, Bulbulia, and Gray (2016) found that ritual human sacrifice was practiced in 40. It occurred in 5 of 20 egalitarian societies (25%), 17 of 46 moderately stratified societies (37%), and 18 of 27 highly stratified societies (67%) (Max Planck Society, 2016). Their models showed that sacrifice stabilized social stratification once it had arisen and

promoted a shift to strictly inherited class systems. Victims were typically of low status, such as slaves, while those who ordered the killings were usually priests and chiefs. In these cases, sacred ritual served the hierarchy directly.

This is the point where Gramsci's insight becomes concrete. Religious rituals, royal myths, and national ideals do not need to be invented cynically to serve power. They only need to make the existing order feel meaningful and right. When rulers are described as chosen by God, or inequality is explained as fate or merit, challenging the hierarchy can feel like challenging the moral order itself. This connects to the bullying research in Part Two: just as the classroom audience grants or withholds status, a believing public grants or withholds legitimacy. It is also far less costly than suppressing resistance by force, a point developed in Chapter 10.

There are important limits. The research does not show that religion is merely a tool of elites. Religious and political beliefs have also inspired resistance to power, from prophets who condemned kings to religious movements for civil rights and abolition. Many believers experience faith as a source of meaning, comfort, and moral courage rather than control. The Watts studies come from one region and depend on how cultures were coded from older ethnographies, and they record only whether sacrifice was present, not how often or why it occurred. The retraction of the Seshat paper shows how much conclusions in this field depend on how missing historical data are handled. The fairest position is that belief can serve power, but it does not always do so.

As an illustration, consider a school's motto painted above the main entrance: "Respect, Responsibility, Excellence." Most students and staff support those values. But a motto can also be used selectively. If students who question unfair rules are labeled "disrespectful," while adults who break rules are not held to the same standard, the shared value begins to protect the hierarchy rather than the community. The belief itself is not the problem; the question is who gets to interpret it.

The evidence supports a balanced conclusion. Shared belief helps large groups cooperate, and experiments show that belief in watchful, punishing gods can extend fairness to distant strangers. But the research also shows that sacred rituals often appear alongside hierarchy and can help stabilize it, and scholars still disagree about whether powerful gods built complex societies or were built by them. Belief is a tool that can be used to build trust, to justify inequality, or to inspire resistance. Its effect depends on who controls the meaning and whether the community can still question it.

If belief can keep people in their place, it raises an economic question: why would rulers rely on belief rather than simple force? Chapter 10 argues that legitimacy is cheaper and more durable than coercion, and examines evidence that people obey rules mainly because they consider them fair, not because they fear punishment.

Chapter 9: Belief as a Tool

Summary: Chapter 9 argues that shared belief, especially religious and political belief, is one of the main substitutes for personal knowledge in large societies. Studies by Purzycki, Norenzayan, and others suggest that belief in watchful, punishing gods can encourage cooperation among strangers. Research by Watts and colleagues shows how ritual and belief could also strengthen elite power. The evidence is contested. A major 2019 study claiming that complex societies came before moralizing gods was retracted after Beheim and colleagues showed problems with how it handled missing data. The chapter concludes that belief can both bind strangers together and make hierarchy seem natural.

Discussion Questions:

1. What shared beliefs make it possible for you to trust strangers in daily life?
2. Can a belief be both good for cooperation and useful for those in power at the same time? Give an example.
3. What does the retraction of a major study teach us about how to treat exciting research claims?
4. Are modern political ideas, national stories, or brand loyalties doing the same work that religion once did?

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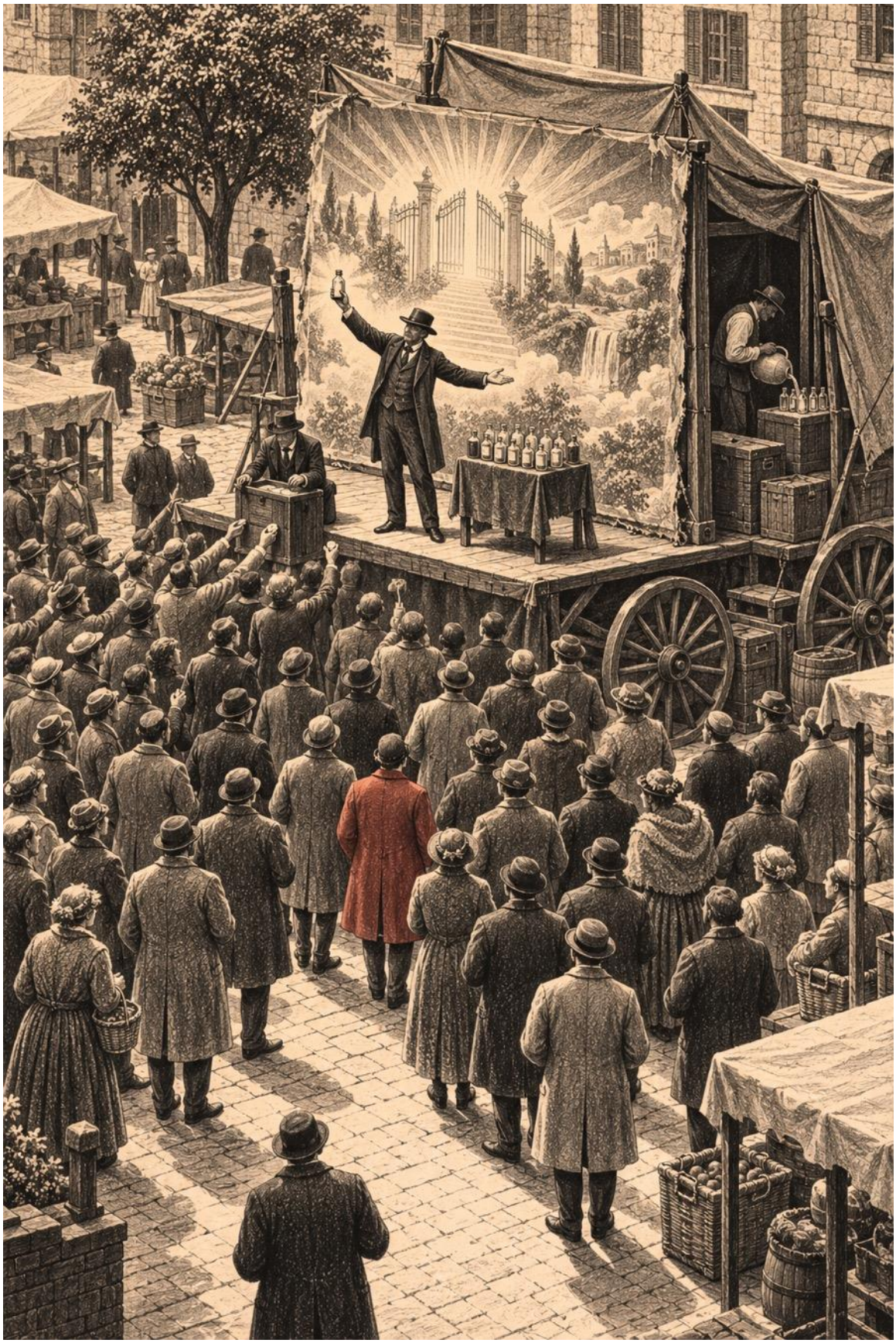

Chapter 10: Cheaper Than Force

Chapter 9 argued that shared belief can make hierarchy feel natural and right. This chapter makes the economic argument behind that claim: legitimacy is cheaper than force. Ruling by coercion requires guards, weapons, surveillance, and constant readiness to punish. Ruling by consent requires only that people believe the rules are fair or the rulers are rightful. The central claim is that large societies maintain order mainly through legitimacy, and that this is both their greatest strength and their greatest vulnerability.

Legitimacy is the belief that an authority has the right to make decisions and that people have a duty to follow them. It differs from fear. A person who obeys out of fear will disobey when no one is watching; a person who obeys out of legitimacy will often comply even when they could get away with breaking the rule. That difference makes legitimacy enormously valuable to anyone in power, because it allows order to be maintained without the constant expense of enforcement.

The anthropologists Helen de Aguiar and Lee Cronk stated this principle directly in a commentary on religion and stratification. "Coercion is one obvious way to maintain control, but it can be costly," they wrote. "Manipulation through the use of signals is often a less costly and less risky alternative" (de Aguiar & Cronk, 2011, p. 73). Their argument was that belief in supernatural punishment may sometimes serve less as a tool of cooperation among equals and more as a tool of obedience to those at the top. This is close to the core thesis of this book.

The psychologist Tom Tyler provided the most influential empirical evidence about legitimacy in modern societies. In Why People Obey the Law, Tyler (2006) analyzed a telephone survey of 1,575 Chicago residents conducted in the spring of 1984, with 804 of them interviewed again a year later. He found that people's compliance with the law depended more on whether they viewed legal authorities as legitimate and procedures as fair than on fear of punishment. People cared about being treated with respect, having a chance to explain their side, and believing that decisions were made neutrally.

Field experiments have tested whether fair treatment can be deliberately produced. In the Queensland Community Engagement Trial in Australia, researchers randomly assigned 60 roadside random breath-testing operations either to business as usual or to a short script that put procedural justice into practice: officers explained the reason for the stop, treated drivers with respect, stayed neutral, and invited drivers to speak (Mazerolle et al., 2012). Drivers who received the scripted encounter were 1.24 times more likely to report that their views on drinking and driving had changed. They also reported slightly higher compliance and satisfaction with police, although these effects were small ($d = .07$ and $d = .18$). A conversation that took slightly more than a minute changed how citizens viewed authority.

Experimental work on religion points in a related direction. Across five studies, Laurin, Shariff, Henrich, and Kay (2012) found that although religiosity in general predicted higher levels of punishment, the specific belief in a powerful, intervening God reduced people's willingness to punish wrongdoers themselves and their support for state-sponsored punishment. The authors

traced this to a reduced sense that humans are responsible for punishing wrongdoers, which they described as "outsourcing" punishment to God. If people trust that a higher authority will handle injustice, they may be less likely to act themselves. For those in power, that reduces both the cost of enforcement and the likelihood of individual resistance.

This connects back to the schoolyard and to Boehm's egalitarian bands. A teacher who runs a classroom only by threat must be constantly vigilant, and students will misbehave the moment the teacher's back is turned. A teacher whom students consider fair can leave the room for a few minutes without chaos. In Chapter 4, foragers restrained would-be dominators by withdrawing their consent; here, consent is the resource that authority depends on. The same principle that makes legitimacy efficient for governments makes it efficient for classrooms, workplaces, and families, and it explains why the audience's approval, discussed in Chapter 6, matters so much.

There are limits to this argument. Tyler's research suggests that legitimacy usually rests on fair treatment, which means it is not simply manipulation; often, people obey institutions because those institutions actually treat them well. The causal evidence is also weaker than often assumed. In a major review, Nagin and Telep (2017) concluded that although perceptions of fair treatment are closely tied to perceived legitimacy, and legitimacy is strongly associated with compliance, it has not been established that policies which make police treatment fairer actually cause greater legal compliance. Tyler (2017) agreed that randomized evidence in policing is scarce. Evidence for the supernatural punishment hypothesis is mixed as well: a cross-cultural study by Bourrat, Atkinson, and Dunbar (2011) found that its predictions about everyday individual behavior were not supported. Legitimacy is cheaper than force, but it is not always a trick, and its effects are not always easy to produce on demand.

As an illustration, consider two ways a school could enforce a no-phones policy. In the first, administrators install cameras, conduct random searches, and suspend students who are caught. In the second, students help write the policy, the reasons are explained clearly, and consequences are applied consistently to everyone. The first approach is expensive and creates resentment; the second costs less and gains more cooperation. But the second approach works only as long as students believe the process is genuinely fair.

The evidence supports the claim that legitimacy is a more efficient basis for order than force, while showing that the details are still debated. Surveys show that people follow rules more reliably when they believe authorities are fair, a field trial shows that brief respectful encounters can shift attitudes, and belief systems can reduce the felt need for human enforcement. Because this works whether the system is fair or not, legitimacy can protect unfair arrangements: the same tool that makes good institutions stable can make bad ones durable. This leads to one of the most puzzling questions in social science. If legitimacy depends on people believing the system is fair, why do people sometimes defend systems that clearly disadvantage them? Chapter 11 examines system justification theory and its critics, and asks whether the disadvantaged truly accept the system or simply comply in public while resisting in private.

Chapter 10: Cheaper Than Force

Summary: Chapter 10 makes the economic case that legitimacy is cheaper than force. Ruling by coercion requires guards, weapons, and constant watching, while ruling by consent requires only that people believe the system is fair. Tyler's research on procedural justice found that people obey the law mainly because they see authorities as legitimate, not because they fear punishment. The Queensland Community Engagement Trial found that fair, respectful police encounters improved how citizens viewed police. Later reviews by Nagin, Telep, and Tyler warn that the link between fair treatment and actual compliance is less certain than early studies suggested. Still, the chapter argues that lasting power depends more on belief than on force.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do most people follow rules even when no one is watching?
2. Think of a rule you follow willingly and one you follow only to avoid punishment. What makes the difference?
3. If fair treatment builds legitimacy, can it also be used to make an unfair system look fair?
4. What happens to a system when people stop believing in it but force is still available?

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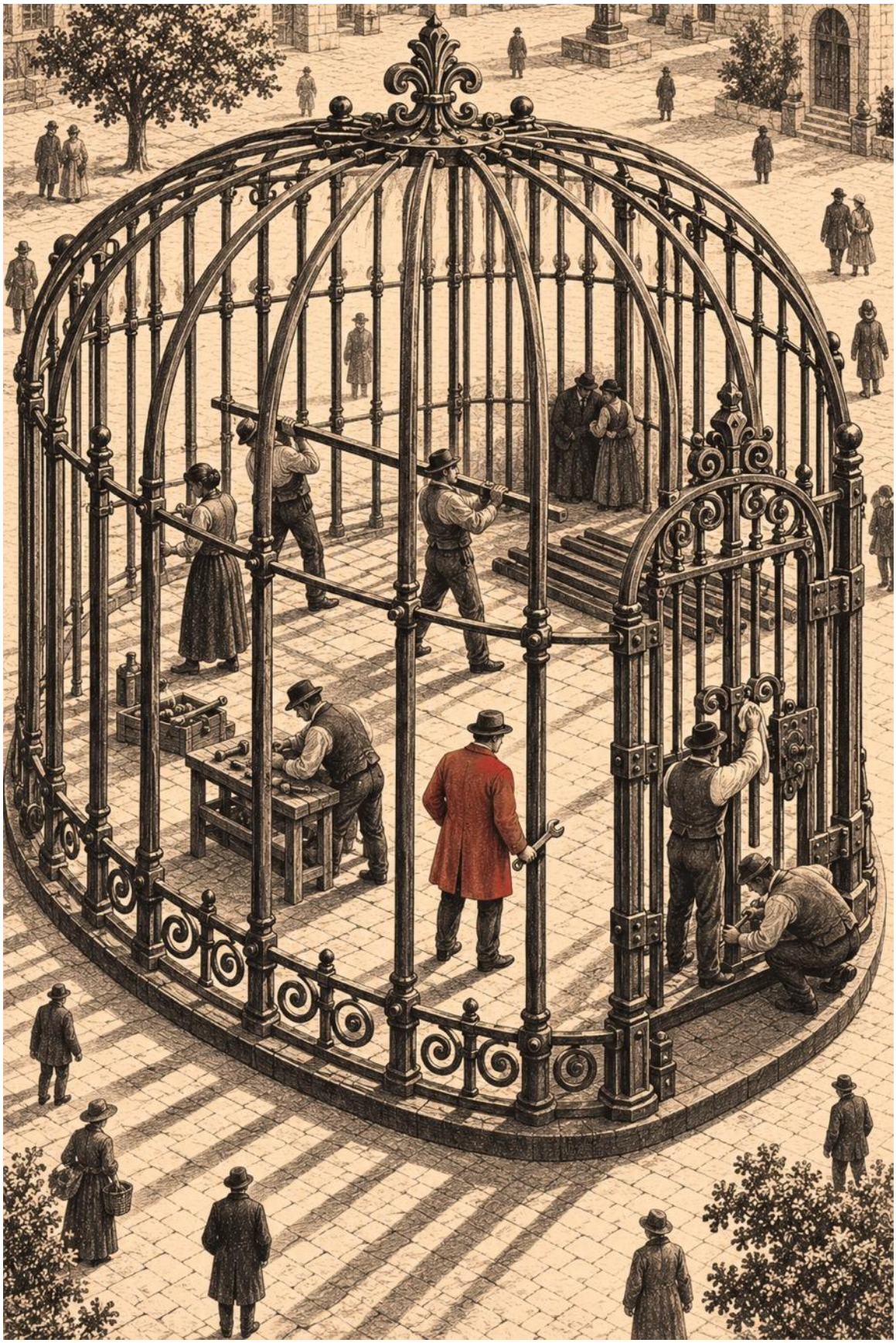

Chapter 11: Defending Systems That Hurt Them

Chapter 10 argued that legitimacy is cheaper than force. This chapter examines a troubling consequence: people sometimes defend the very systems that disadvantage them. The central claim is that people have a psychological motive to see the existing social order as fair and stable, and that this motive can lead them to accept inequality. But the chapter also presents strong evidence that this acceptance is often weaker, more conditional, and more strategic than it first appears.

The leading framework is system justification theory, developed by John Jost and Mahzarin Banaji. The theory proposes that, in addition to defending their own interests and their group's interests, people are motivated to defend and justify the social system they live in (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Believing that the system is fair can reduce anxiety, uncertainty, and the sense of threat. But it can also lead people to explain inequality as deserved, and to resist changes that might benefit them.

Jost's (2019) 25-year review summarized a large body of research on the theory. Studies have found that people often rationalize the status quo, view existing arrangements as more desirable once they seem inevitable, and endorse stereotypes that make inequality seem natural, such as describing poor people as happy or lower-status groups as warm but less competent. Jost also discussed the "status–legitimacy hypothesis," the most controversial prediction of the theory: that disadvantaged groups may sometimes justify the system even more than advantaged groups do, because they have the most to gain psychologically from believing it is fair.

Experiments have shown how quickly "what is" can become "what should be." Kay and colleagues (2009) called this tendency "injunctification" and tested it in four studies. When participants' motivation to justify their system was experimentally heightened, for example by stressing how much their lives depended on it, they came to view existing political power, funding policies, and gender imbalances as more desirable. In one study of Canadian politics, women whose system-justifying motive had been activated rated women as less desirable Members of Parliament when told that few women held seats than when told that many did (Gaucher & Jost, 2011). The same process increased disapproval of people who acted against the status quo (Kay et al., 2009). The status quo, in other words, can shape the ideals people use to judge it.

The status–legitimacy hypothesis has been tested directly, with largely negative results. Brandt (2013) analyzed three large representative data sets from the United States and around the world: the American National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, and the World Values Survey, with a combined 151,794 respondents. The average effect was "most often directly contrary to the status–legitimacy hypothesis or was practically zero." Brandt concluded that "the status–legitimacy effect is not a robust phenomenon" (p. 765). Disadvantaged people did not generally legitimize the system more than advantaged people, and often legitimized it less.

Other researchers argue that the effect appears only under specific conditions. In a national probability sample of 6,162 New Zealanders, Sengupta, Osborne, and Sibley (2015) found that two low-status ethnic groups, Asians and Pacific Islanders, perceived ethnic-group relations as fairer than the high-status European group did. Yet these groups did not justify the overall political system more, and Māori, another disadvantaged group, showed the least support for the political system of any group. The authors concluded that low-status groups may defend the specific hierarchy that disadvantages them, but not the system as a whole. The debate is narrower than it once was, but it is not fully settled.

The political scientist James C. Scott offers a different explanation for apparent acceptance. In Domination and the Arts of Resistance, Scott (1990) argues that subordinate groups often perform deference in public, a "public transcript," while expressing criticism and resistance in private, a "hidden transcript." Jokes, rumors, folk tales, foot-dragging, and quiet noncompliance allow people to resist without risking open confrontation. Scott opens the book with an Ethiopian proverb: "When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts." What looks like acceptance may simply be prudence. This connects back to Chapter 6: the outsider in a bullying episode may stay silent not because they approve but because speaking up feels too dangerous.

The limits are significant on both sides. System justification research often relies on surveys that cannot easily distinguish sincere belief from strategic answers, and many experiments, including those by Kay and colleagues, use university students in short laboratory sessions. Brandt's results challenge one of the theory's most striking predictions. Scott's argument, in turn, is difficult to test, because hidden transcripts are by definition hidden, and critics argue that it can make any behavior look like resistance. A careful book should not claim that the disadvantaged always accept their position, nor that they always secretly reject it.

As an illustration, consider a school where students consistently describe the discipline system as fair in official surveys. In the hallways and group chats, however, the same students joke about which teachers play favorites and which rules apply only to certain students. An administrator who reads only the surveys would conclude the system is legitimate. One who listens to the hallways would recognize a hidden transcript. Both views capture part of the truth.

The evidence supports a qualified version of the book's claim. People do sometimes defend systems that disadvantage them, and experiments show a real psychological pull toward seeing the way things are as the way they should be. But the strongest form of this claim, that the disadvantaged are the system's most loyal defenders, is not supported by the largest tests. Much apparent acceptance is conditional, limited to specific hierarchies, or performed for safety, and beneath it, criticism often survives in private. That hidden criticism matters because it is the raw material for future change. If hidden resistance persists beneath public compliance, what turns it into open action? Chapter 12 examines moments of flux, when hierarchies become unstable, and how leaders and movements can either channel discontent toward change or redirect it to protect those already in power.

Chapter 11: Defending Systems That Hurt Them

Summary: Chapter 11 examines why people sometimes defend systems that disadvantage them. System justification theory, developed by Jost and Banaji, proposes a motive to see the existing order as fair and stable. Experiments by Kay and colleagues suggest people may even come to prefer conditions simply because they seem unchangeable. Large-scale tests by Brandt and by Sengupta and colleagues found little support for the idea that disadvantaged groups defend the system more than advantaged ones. Scott's research on "hidden transcripts" shows that public acceptance often hides private criticism. The chapter concludes that acceptance of inequality is real but often weaker and more conditional than it appears.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why might it feel more comfortable to believe a system is fair than to admit it is not?
2. Have you ever defended a rule or tradition mainly because "that is the way things are"?
3. If public acceptance can hide private criticism, how would we ever know what people really think?
4. What turns private complaints into public action?

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Chapter 12: Flux and Movements

Chapter 11 showed that beneath public acceptance, criticism and resistance often survive in private. This chapter examines what happens when that hidden discontent surfaces. The central claim is that hierarchies are most vulnerable during periods of flux, when economic, social, or political change makes the existing order unstable. In those moments, discontent can be organized into movements for change, or it can be redirected by those in power to divide people and protect existing hierarchies.

Flux refers to periods when established rules and positions become uncertain. Economic crises, wars, migrations, technological change, and political conflict can all unsettle a status system. People who once felt secure may lose their standing, and people who were excluded may see an opening. These moments create both risk and opportunity: they make change possible, but they also make people more open to leaders who promise certainty and protection, and to explanations that place the blame on someone else.

Large-scale data show how flux reshapes politics. Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch (2016) built a data set covering 20 advanced economies and more than 800 general elections from 1870 to 2014. They found that after systemic financial crises, government majorities shrank, polarization rose, and policy uncertainty increased. "After a crisis, voters seem to be particularly attracted to the political rhetoric of the extreme right, which often attributes blame to minorities or foreigners," they wrote; "on average, far-right parties increase their vote share by 30% after a financial crisis" (p. 227). Importantly, they did not find the same pattern after normal recessions or after severe economic shocks that were not financial in nature. Crises that appear to be caused by elites seem to open the door to movements that redirect anger toward outsiders.

One of the clearest historical examples of flux comes from colonial Virginia. In 1676, Nathaniel Bacon led an armed uprising against Governor William Berkeley, driven by a mix of grievances that included conflict with Native peoples, taxes, and resentment of the governor's circle; the rebellion was also marked by violence against Native communities. On September 19, 1676, Bacon's forces burned Jamestown, the colonial capital. Bacon died of illness on October 26, but fighting continued, and as it did, the remaining rebels increasingly included "servants and slaves who did not wish to return to servitude" (Rice, 2020). The rebellion was not fully over until January 1677. Its significance for this book lies in what followed.

The historian Edmund Morgan argued in American Slavery, American Freedom that the cooperation of poor white and Black laborers during the rebellion alarmed Virginia's elite, and that the colony's later shift toward racial slavery helped divide those groups (Morgan, 1975). Over the following decades, Virginia's labor force changed dramatically. In the 1670s, "the ratio of white servants to enslaved Africans was four to one"; by the early 1690s, "the ratio had reversed: there were now four times as many enslaved Africans as white servants" (Wolfe, 2020). The Slave Code of 1705 then hardened legal distinctions between white Christian servants and enslaved people, even allowing enslaved people to be killed in various situations without penalty (Wolfe, 2020). In this interpretation, a moment of flux was resolved by creating a new status line, race, that gave poor whites a stake in the hierarchy.

The social philosopher Eric Hoffer examined the psychology of people who join movements during such periods. In The True Believer, Hoffer (1951) argued that mass movements draw especially on people who feel frustrated, displaced, or dissatisfied with their lives, and that these movements offer a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose. He suggested that movements with very different goals, religious, nationalist, or revolutionary, can appeal to similar psychological needs. For this book, Hoffer's insight is that flux creates a hunger for new forms of status and protection that leaders can exploit, and the financial crisis data suggest that this hunger is often fed by blaming outsiders.

These examples connect to earlier chapters in a specific way. In Chapter 6, the bully's power depended on how the audience responded; in Bacon's Rebellion, the elite's power depended on whether poor laborers saw each other as allies or rivals. In Chapter 9, belief was shown to make hierarchy seem natural; here, a new legal category made a new hierarchy seem natural. Creating a status difference between groups who might

otherwise unite is a large-scale version of a classroom dynamic in which students are encouraged to compete with each other rather than question the person causing harm.

There are important limits. Historians disagree about how much Bacon's Rebellion caused the shift toward slavery. Some emphasize social changes after the rebellion that increased white hostility toward non-whites, while others point out that the move to enslaved labor occurred when the flow of servants from England fell off dramatically around 1680, or when England's growing role in the Atlantic slave trade made enslaved labor cheaper (Wolfe, 2020). The financial crisis research shows a strong average pattern, but it is correlational, varies by country, and its authors note that the effects weaken over time. Hoffer's work is a set of reflective essays rather than a systematic study, and its claims about the psychology of movement members are generalizations that later research has qualified. These sources are best used as evidence of patterns and possibilities, not as proof of a single cause.

As an illustration, consider a school district facing budget cuts. Teachers, support staff, and parents all face losses and begin to organize together. Then district leaders propose a plan that protects one group's positions while cutting another's. The coalition fractures, as each group focuses on defending its own place. The leaders did not need to suppress the protest; they only needed to give some members a reason to see the others as competitors. Moments of flux are often decided by who gets divided from whom.

The evidence supports the claim that hierarchies are most vulnerable during periods of flux, and that those moments can be resolved in more than one direction. Discontent can create new alliances that challenge power, as briefly happened in 1676, or it can be channeled into new divisions that strengthen existing hierarchies, as Virginia's turn to racial slavery and the post-crisis rise of the far right both suggest. The difference often depends on whether people recognize their shared interests and whether leaders succeed in creating new status lines between them. If flux creates the possibility of change, the next question is what limits individuals' ability to act. People do not choose freely when they depend on a group for safety, income, and belonging. Part Four turns to the question of choice, beginning in Chapter 13 with the conditions under which people accept or resist authority, and the options available to those who are dissatisfied.

Chapter 12: Flux and Movements

Summary: Chapter 12 argues that hierarchies are most vulnerable during periods of flux, when economic, social, or political change destabilizes the existing order. Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch found that financial crises are often followed by political polarization and rising support for the far right. Bacon's Rebellion in colonial Virginia shows how elites can redirect cross-racial discontent by dividing the groups involved, as Morgan described. Hoffer and Gramsci offer contrasting views of how movements and ruling ideas take hold. The chapter warns that instability does not reliably lead to fairer systems. It can produce reform, but it can also produce new forms of domination.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why might people be more open to change during a crisis than during stable times?
2. How do leaders redirect public anger toward other groups instead of toward themselves?
3. What separates a movement that builds a fairer system from one that simply replaces one hierarchy with another?
4. Are we living through a period of flux now? What signs do you see?

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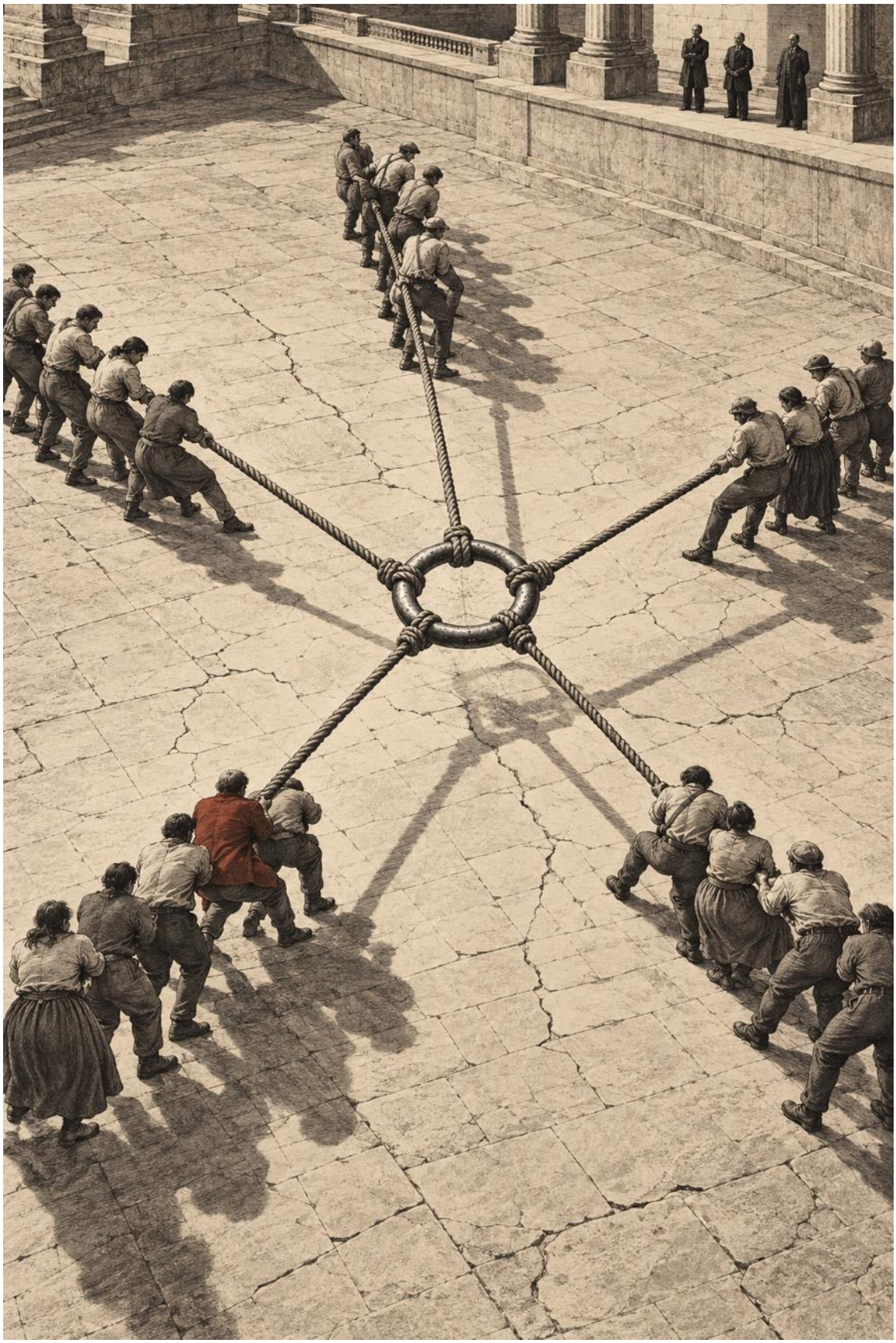

Chapter 13: Constrained Choice

Part Three showed how large societies maintain hierarchy through belief, legitimacy, and the management of discontent. This chapter turns to the individual and asks a direct question: how free are people to choose within these systems? The central claim is that choice is real but constrained. People can accept, resist, or leave a group, but their options depend on how much they rely on that group for protection and belonging, and on whether they can act together with others. Tyranny becomes most acceptable not when people are evil, but when they feel powerless and alone.

The economist Albert Hirschman offered a useful framework for thinking about choice in Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Hirschman (1970) argued that members of any organization, whether a company, a political party, or a nation, have two basic responses when it declines: they can leave (exit) or speak up to change it (voice). Loyalty affects which option they choose; people who feel attached to an organization are more likely to stay and speak up, at least for a while. Exit and voice also interact. When exit is easy, the most capable critics may simply leave, and the organization loses the people most likely to reform it.

In Boehm's egalitarian bands, all of these choices were available. People could criticize leaders, refuse to follow them, or leave and join another band (Boehm, 1993). That freedom of movement was one of the most important checks on dominance. In large modern societies, exit is often much more costly. Leaving a job, a religious community, or a country can mean losing income, relationships, and legal protection. When exit is costly, voice becomes more important, but voice also carries risk, and it is far less risky when others speak too.

Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments show how much the presence of allies matters. In his best-known condition, 26 of 40 men (65%) continued to the maximum 450-volt level when an experimenter told them to keep shocking a protesting "learner," who was actually an actor (Milgram, 1974). But in a variation called "two peers rebel," the participant worked alongside two other "teachers," confederates who refused to continue at 150 and 210 volts. In that condition, only 4 of 40 participants (10%) went to the maximum; the other 36 defied the experimenter (Milgram, 1974). The authority, the setting, and the orders were the same. What changed was whether the participant stood alone.

Reicher and Haslam's (2006) BBC Prison Study examined how groups respond to authority over a longer period. Revisiting the famous Stanford Prison Experiment, in which Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973) reported that students assigned to be guards became abusive, Reicher and Haslam randomly assigned 15 men, selected from 332 applicants, to be guards or prisoners in a specially built institution for eight days. The results contradicted the idea that people automatically conform to their roles. The guards failed to identify with their position and were reluctant to impose authority, while the prisoners developed a shared identity and eventually overcame the guards.

What followed was even more revealing. After the prisoners' challenge, the participants set up an egalitarian, self-governing system. When it proved unsustainable, moves to impose a tyrannical regime "met with weakening resistance." Reicher and Haslam (2006) concluded that "it is powerlessness and the failure of groups that makes tyranny psychologically acceptable" (p. 1). The finding suggests that people accept domination not because they are naturally obedient, but when cooperative alternatives seem to have failed.

This connects directly to the book's central question about protection. People who feel safe and capable together are more likely to resist domination, as both the "two peers rebel" participants and the BBC prisoners did. People whose collective efforts have failed may accept a strong leader who promises order. This helps explain why authoritarian movements often gain support after periods of instability, the kind of flux described in Chapter 12, and it echoes Chapter 6, where a single defender changed what the rest of the audience was willing to do. The strength of a community's shared identity and institutions is a protection against tyranny.

There are important limits. The BBC Prison Study was a single study with 15 participants, and it was filmed for television, which may have influenced behavior. The Stanford study it challenged has itself come under heavy criticism: an investigation of its archives and interviews with 15 of the original participants found that the guards received precise instructions on how to treat prisoners and that data collection was biased and incomplete (Le Texier, 2019). Milgram's studies involved American men in the early 1960s, and each condition used only 40 participants. Hirschman's framework is a theoretical model, not an empirical finding, and real choices are rarely limited to three neat options. These sources illuminate possibilities rather than prove a general law about human obedience.

As an illustration, imagine a teacher who disagrees strongly with a new district policy. She could leave the district (exit), speak at a board meeting (voice), or comply quietly while hoping things improve (loyalty). If she has a mortgage, a pension that depends on staying, and no colleagues willing to speak with her, exit and voice both become costly, and quiet compliance may feel like the only option. If twenty colleagues are ready to speak with her, the calculation changes completely. Her freedom depends less on her courage than on her connections.

The evidence supports the view that choice within hierarchies is real but constrained by dependence and isolation. People are not passive conformists; they can resist and organize, as the BBC prisoners did, and when even two peers refuse, most people find the courage to refuse as well. But when exit is costly and collective efforts fail, people become more willing to accept domination in exchange for order. The most important resource for freedom, in this view, is not individual willpower but a group capable of acting together. If freedom depends on standing within a group, then it is reasonable to ask whether status affects not only choices but well-being itself. Chapter 14 examines evidence that position in a hierarchy shapes health, longevity, and happiness, and asks whether the currency of status is also, in a literal sense, a matter of life and death.

Chapter 13: Constrained Choice

Summary: Chapter 13 asks how free people really are within hierarchies and argues that choice is real but constrained. Hirschman's framework of exit, voice, and loyalty describes the main options. Which ones a person can actually use depends on how much they rely on the group. Milgram's obedience experiments showed how situations shape compliance, but they also showed that obedience dropped sharply when peers refused. Critiques of the Stanford Prison Experiment by Le Texier, and the BBC Prison Study by Reicher and Haslam, show that people do not simply fall into roles. They respond to leadership and to group identity. The chapter concludes that individual freedom grows when people have allies and real alternatives.

Discussion Questions:

1. When have you stayed silent in a group because leaving or speaking up felt too costly?
2. Why did obedience in Milgram's studies fall so sharply when others refused? What does that suggest about courage?
3. Does knowing that the Stanford Prison Experiment was flawed change how you think about human nature?
4. Who in your community has the fewest real options to exit or speak up, and why?

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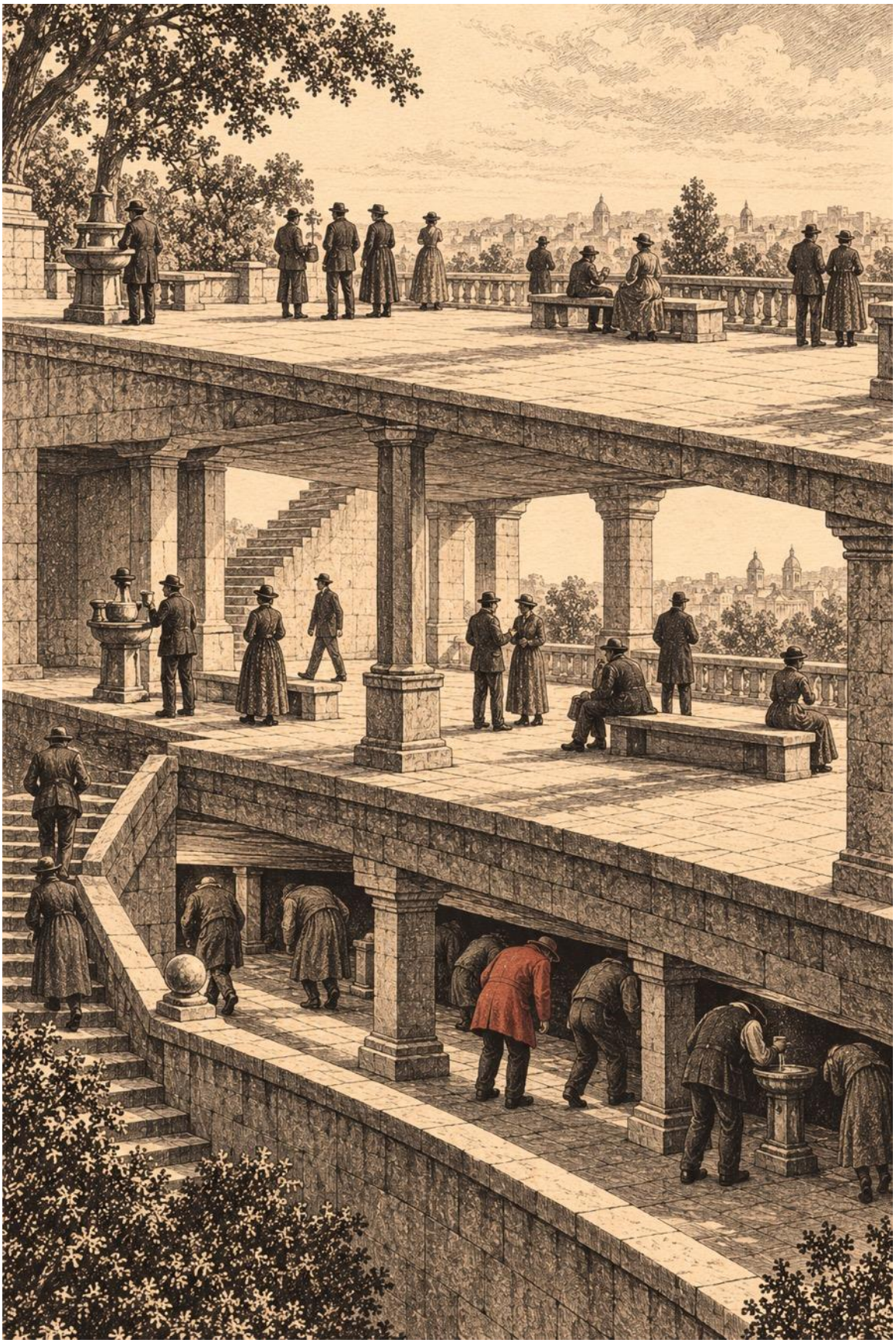

Chapter 14: Status and Happiness

Chapter 13 argued that a person's freedom of choice depends on their position within a group. This chapter extends that argument to health and well-being. The central claim is that status shapes not only what people can do, but how long and how well they live. People lower in a hierarchy tend to have worse health and shorter lives, and this pattern cannot be fully explained by poverty or personal habits. If status is a currency, its effects are written into the body.

Two ideas need to be distinguished. The first is absolute deprivation: lacking enough food, shelter, or medical care. The second is relative position: where a person stands compared with others, even when their basic needs are met. Much research on status and health focuses on the second idea, asking whether being lower in a hierarchy is harmful in itself, apart from material hardship. If it is, then status is not only a social reward but a biological condition.

The most influential evidence comes from the Whitehall studies of British civil servants, led by Michael Marmot. The first Whitehall study classified 17,530 civil servants by employment grade and recorded their deaths over 10 years. All had stable jobs, and none were poor by ordinary standards. Yet compared with the highest grade, administrators, men in the lowest grade had "3 times the mortality rate from coronary heart disease, from a range of other causes, and from all causes combined" (Marmot et al., 1984, p. 1003). Smoking and other coronary risk factors were more common in the lower grades, but these differences accounted for "only part of the mortality difference." The gradient also ran through every step of the hierarchy, not only between the top and bottom.

Marmot later developed this research into a general argument in The Status Syndrome. Marmot (2004) proposed that the health gradient, the finding that health improves at each step up a social hierarchy, results largely from differences in autonomy and social participation. People with less control over their lives and less opportunity for full participation in society experience more chronic stress, and that stress damages health. This connects directly to Chapter 13: constrained choice is not only a political problem but a biological one.

Animal research supports this idea. Sapolsky's long-term studies of wild baboons showed that low-ranking animals in stable, aggressive hierarchies tended to have higher levels of stress hormones, and that the costs of rank depended on the kind of hierarchy they lived in (Sapolsky, 2017). In the troop described in Chapter 1, where the most aggressive males died and the culture became calmer, low-ranking baboons were treated with less hostility (Sapolsky & Share, 2004). The health effects of low status seem to depend partly on how harshly a hierarchy is enforced.

The strongest causal evidence comes from an experiment that is impossible to run on humans. Snyder-Mackler and colleagues (2016) manipulated the dominance ranks of 45 adult female rhesus macaques by forming nine new groups of five, adding females one at a time so that earlier arrivals became higher ranking. After a year, they reshuffled the groups so that many animals changed rank. Low status produced a proinflammatory immune profile similar to that linked with chronic disease in people, and low-ranking females showed a stronger inflammatory response to a bacterial challenge. Because the animals received the same food and care, the authors

concluded that "social subordination alone is sufficient to alter immune function." The effects were also "largely plastic": when a female's rank rose, her immune profile improved.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett extended this logic to whole societies. In The Spirit Level, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) compared 23 rich countries and the 50 U.S. states and reported that places with larger income gaps tended to have worse outcomes on a range of measures, including life expectancy, mental illness, imprisonment, obesity, teenage births, and trust. Their explanation was that greater inequality intensifies status competition and anxiety throughout society, not just among the poor. If the Whitehall and macaque findings describe the costs of low rank for individuals, The Spirit Level asks whether steeper hierarchies impose costs on everyone.

These findings face serious criticism. Saunders (2010) and Snowdon (2010) argued that the Spirit Level correlations depended on which countries were included, that some relationships weakened or disappeared when outliers were removed, and that the analysis did not adequately control for other causes. A widely cited finding often used to illustrate status effects, that Academy Award winners lived about 3.9 years longer than less successful performers (Redelmeier & Singh, 2001), was later corrected for "immortal time" bias: the original method credited winners' years of life before they won. In the reanalysis, the advantage shrank to about 1 year and was not statistically significant (Sylvestre et al., 2006). Animal experiments, however strong, also cannot show exactly how much of the human gradient comes from stress rather than from education, income, or early-life conditions. The relationship between status and health is real, but specific claims should be handled carefully.

As an illustration, consider two paraprofessionals working in the same school. One is regularly consulted by teachers, has some say over her schedule, and is thanked publicly. The other is given tasks without explanation, is excluded from meetings, and has no control over how her day is structured. Their pay is the same. Marmot's research suggests that over many years, the second worker may experience more chronic stress and worse health, not because of her income, but because of her position.

The evidence strongly supports the claim that position in a hierarchy affects health, even among people who are not poor. The Whitehall findings are among the most robust in social epidemiology, the macaque experiment shows that rank alone can change the immune system, and both fit the arguments of earlier chapters about autonomy and control. Claims that inequality alone explains a wide range of social problems are more contested and should be presented as an active debate. The encouraging finding is that these effects appear to be reversible: when position improves, health can follow. If status affects health and happiness, then designing better systems is not only a matter of fairness but of well-being. Part Five turns from diagnosis to design, beginning in Chapter 15 with the question of how societies, past and present, have built checks and balances that limit the power status can buy.

Chapter 14: Status and Happiness

Summary: Chapter 14 argues that status shapes how long and how well people live, not just what they can do. The Whitehall study of more than 17,000 British civil servants found that men in the lowest job grades had about three times the mortality of those at the top, and standard risk factors

explained only part of the gap. Research on macaques by Snyder-Mackler and colleagues showed that changing an animal's rank changed its immune function. The chapter includes counterevidence: an early claim that Oscar winners live about four years longer shrank to about one nonsignificant year in a reanalysis, and critics such as Saunders and Snowdon challenge parts of The Spirit Level. The weight of evidence still suggests that rank affects health.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why might being lower in a hierarchy harm health even when basic needs are met?
2. How does stress about status show up in schools or workplaces you know?
3. What does the Oscar reanalysis teach us about how surprising findings should be checked?
4. If status affects health, should societies try to reduce inequality for health reasons alone? Why or why not?

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Chapter 15: Checks and Balances on Status

Chapter 14 showed that a person's position in a hierarchy affects their health and well-being, and that these effects can reverse when that position changes. If status causes this much harm, the next question is how to limit that harm without pretending hierarchy can be eliminated. The central claim of this chapter is that the most durable protections against domination are mechanisms rather than ideals: practical arrangements that let ordinary people restrain those who seek too much power. Small-scale societies used such mechanisms long before modern constitutions, and their successes and failures offer lessons for institutions today.

The key idea comes from the anthropologist Christopher Boehm. Chapter 4 used his work to show that resistance to domination is natural. This chapter uses it to ask why resistance works. Boehm (1993) argued that egalitarian societies are not societies without hierarchy. Instead, they reverse the usual order. In what he called a reverse dominance hierarchy, followers band together to dominate would-be leaders, rather than the other way around. Leadership was permitted, but bossiness was not. Leaders who were generous, fair, and good at settling disputes kept their roles as "first among equals," while those who tried to give orders faced resistance from the group.

Boehm's evidence came from a cross-cultural survey of ethnographic reports. In 48 societies that reported deliberate efforts to control leaders, he found a consistent set of tools: public opinion, criticism and ridicule, disobedience, and extreme sanctions such as exile or, in rare cases, execution (Boehm, 1993). These sanctions were graduated, escalating only when milder measures failed. In 38 of the 48 societies, groups cut off relations with overly assertive individuals or removed them from leadership roles. Boehm concluded that "a reverse dominance hierarchy is present only when the strongest individuals in a group are denied power by assertive collective action on a continuing basis" (p. 233). Equality was not a natural resting state. People had to maintain it actively.

Boehm's research also shows how these checks broke down. He linked the shift to permanent hierarchy with several changes, including settled life, which made it harder to leave a domineering leader; larger and denser populations; military threats that seemed to require strong leaders; and the rise of charismatic or supernatural authority (Boehm, 1993, 1999). Each change weakened one of the group's traditional tools. Ridicule loses force in a crowd of strangers, and exit is harder when a family's fields and stored grain cannot be moved. The lesson is that checks on status have to suit the scale and conditions in which they operate.

David Graeber and David Wengrow's The Dawn of Everything challenges the idea that hierarchy followed agriculture in only one direction. Graeber and Wengrow (2021) describe societies that changed their political arrangements with the seasons. Some gathered under strong authority for communal hunts or ceremonies, then dispersed into looser, more egalitarian groups for the rest of the year. They argue that many early societies protected three basic freedoms: the freedom to move away, the freedom to disobey, and the freedom to create new social arrangements. In their

view, the modern problem is not that hierarchy exists, but that people have lost the ability to change or leave it.

Modern institutions contain formal versions of the same tools. Elections, term limits, independent courts, a free press, the right to strike, and the right to resign let ordinary people remove, criticize, refuse, or leave those who hold power. Evidence on term limits shows both how much these mechanisms are tested and how they survive. Versteeg et al. (2020) studied 234 incumbent presidents in 106 countries since 2000 and found that about one-third of those who reached the end of their term tried to stay in office. Outside the strongest democracies, the figure rose to about half. Few did so by openly defying the constitution. Most used legal routes, and about two-thirds of attempts involved amending the constitution. Yet about one-third of these attempts failed, and in most of those cases the attempt "encountered widespread popular resistance." Formal rules mattered, but they worked best when citizens were willing to enforce them.

This connects to several earlier chapters. Chapter 4 showed that resistance to domination appears across human societies, and this chapter shows how it is organized. Chapter 6 found that bystanders hold the power to support or undermine bullies, and Boehm's reverse dominance hierarchy is essentially a coalition of bystanders acting together. Chapter 12 described societies moving through periods of flux, and Graeber and Wengrow suggest that this movement can be deliberate. Chapter 13 showed that obedience in Milgram's experiments dropped sharply when peers refused to go along. The common thread is that would-be dominant individuals are restrained by coordinated refusal, not by the courage of isolated individuals.

There are important limits to this argument. The Dawn of Everything has been widely praised for its ambition but criticized by archaeologists and historians. Morris (2022) concluded that its "arguments run more on rhetoric than on method," and other reviewers have argued that it relies on selected cases and underplays environmental and material constraints. Boehm's sample came from small groups and, by his own account, reflected some reporting bias, so it is unclear how well tools like ridicule can work in societies of millions. Formal checks can also be captured: in the term-limit study, about two-thirds of the presidents who tried to stay in office succeeded, often by using courts and amendment procedures designed to restrain them (Versteeg et al., 2020). Mechanisms are necessary, but they do not enforce themselves.

As an illustration, imagine a school where the student council controls part of the activities budget and can hold a vote of no confidence in its own officers. A popular council president begins steering funds toward his friends' clubs. Other members first raise the issue privately, then question him openly at a meeting, and finally call a vote, which replaces him. No adult has to intervene. The process works because the rule existed in advance, everyone understood it, and it carried real authority. It follows the same graduated sequence Boehm described, from criticism to removal. Without that structure, the same students might have had nothing but gossip and resentment.

The evidence supports the claim that checks on status work best when they are practical, graduated, suited to the size of the group, and backed by people willing to use them. Small groups restrained domination through ridicule, refusal, and exit, and large societies rely on

formal institutions that perform similar functions. The historical record shows considerable variety in how power has been limited, even if some claims about that variety are disputed. Checks also have to be maintained, because those who hold power have strong incentives to weaken them, and they often do so through legal means. Checks and balances restrain those at the top, but some communities have gone further by spreading decisions so widely that no single center controls them. Chapter 16 examines Elinor Ostrom's research on communities that managed shared resources for generations, and asks what her design principles reveal about governance without domination.

Chapter 15: Checks and Balances on Status

Summary: Chapter 15 argues that the strongest protections against domination are practical mechanisms, not ideals. Boehm's survey shows that small-scale societies routinely removed, cut off, or ignored leaders who overreached. In modern states, Versteeg and colleagues studied 234 incumbents in 106 countries and found that about one-third tried to stay in office beyond their term limits. About two-thirds of those attempts succeeded, and failures usually came from popular resistance. Graeber and Wengrow argue that early societies experimented widely with political forms, though critics such as Morris question their methods. The chapter concludes that checks on power work only when ordinary people are willing and able to enforce them.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why are written rules, such as term limits, not enough on their own to stop leaders from overstaying?
2. What checks on power exist in your school, workplace, or community, and who enforces them?
3. Is it possible to have strong leadership and strong limits on that leadership at the same time?
4. What makes ordinary people willing to defend a rule when breaking it would be easier?

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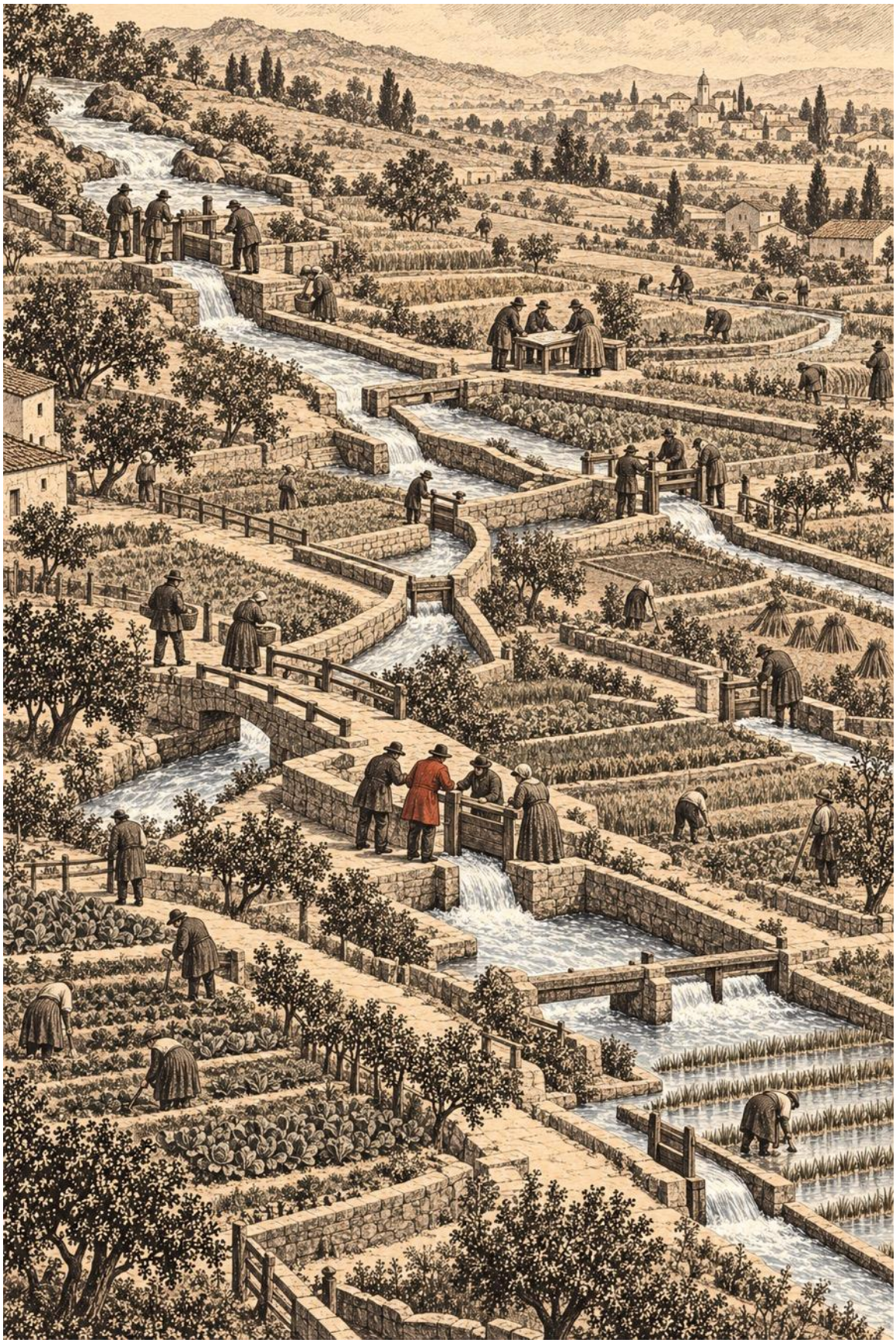

Chapter 16: Distributed Governance

Chapter 15 argued that lasting checks on power have to be practical mechanisms suited to the size of the group, and that they work only when people are willing to use them. This chapter looks at one of the most closely studied examples of such mechanisms: communities that govern shared resources without either a central ruler or private ownership. The central claim is that people can sustain cooperation in large and complex settings when decision-making is spread across many centers and when the rules are written by the people who must live by them. Distributed governance turns the informal tools of small egalitarian groups into lasting institutions.

The research responds to a famous pessimistic argument. In "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin (1968) argued that shared resources such as pastures or fisheries would inevitably be overused, because each person gains the full benefit of taking more while the costs are spread across everyone. The usual remedies were government control or private property. Elinor Ostrom challenged this choice between the two. She showed that Hardin had described open access, a resource anyone can use without rules, rather than a true commons, where a defined community holds rights and enforces limits (Ostrom, 1990). Many communities had escaped the tragedy by governing the resource themselves.

Ostrom's best-known case was Törbel, a village in the Swiss Alps. Written legal records there go back to 1224. On February 1, 1483, residents formed an association to regulate the use of their alpine meadows, forests, and wastelands. A regulation written in 1517 stated that "no citizen could send more cows to the alp than he could feed during the winter," and a local official enforced the rule by fining violators and keeping half of the fines (Ostrom, 1990, p. 62). Ostrom drew on Törbel and on cases from Japanese forest villages and from irrigation systems in Spain and the Philippines. From them she identified eight design principles: clear boundaries, rules that fit local conditions, collective choice by those affected, monitoring by people accountable to users, graduated sanctions, accessible conflict resolution, recognition of the community's right to organize, and nested layers of governance for larger systems. She received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009.

Ostrom's research in Nepal tested this idea against centralized expertise. Many irrigation systems there were built and managed by farmers with simple materials, while others were built with donor funding and run by government engineers. In one comparison, 86 farmer-governed systems produced an average of about 6 metric tons of rice per hectare a year, compared with 5 metric tons for 22 agency-managed systems (Ostrom et al., 1994). The difference was clearest in getting water to farmers at the far end of the canals, who have the least power. During the dry spring season, about 1 in 4 farmer-managed systems delivered adequate water to the tail end, compared with only 1 in 11 agency systems. During the monsoon, almost 90% of farmer-managed systems did so, compared with fewer than half of agency systems. The authors concluded that "the incentives of farmers and officials weigh more in determining performance than the engineering of physical systems" (p. 206).

Later research has tested the design principles more broadly. Cox et al. (2010) analyzed 91 studies that evaluated Ostrom's principles and concluded that they "are well supported empirically." They also proposed refinements, such as separating boundaries around users from boundaries around the resource. Baggio et al. (2016) examined 69 cases of irrigation, fishery, and forestry management and found that success depended on combinations of principles rather than any single one. Rules that fit local conditions and a fair balance between what users contribute and what they take were important in every type of resource. Other principles mattered more in some settings than others: clear social boundaries mattered most for mobile resources such as fish, and monitoring mattered most for fixed resources such as forests.

Ostrom and her colleagues called the broader approach polycentric governance: a system with many centers of decision-making, each with some independence, operating within a shared framework of rules. McGinnis (2016), a colleague of Ostrom's at Indiana University, defines such systems as multiple authorities with overlapping responsibilities that adjust to one another and build new partnerships over time. In a polycentric system, no single authority controls everything. A dissatisfied group can appeal to another center, form its own association, or work through a different level of government. This structure makes it harder for any one faction to dominate, because power is divided among many places where it can be challenged.

The parallels with earlier chapters are close. Ostrom's graduated sanctions resemble the escalating sanctions Boehm found in egalitarian bands, discussed in Chapter 15, which began with mild disapproval and grew harsher only when needed. Her monitoring by accountable users is a formal version of the gossip and public opinion that small groups use. Nested governance offers an answer to the scale problem raised in Chapter 8: when groups grow too large for everyone to know one another, larger systems can be built from smaller units in which people still do. The finding that farmers outperformed engineers also supports Chapter 14's argument that autonomy and participation matter, both for well-being and for outcomes.

There are important limits. McGinnis (2016) identified six common failures of polycentric governance in practice: structural inequities, a bias toward small incremental changes, high complexity, deep structural divisions, coordination failures, and a lack of clarity about shared values. Cox et al. (2010) recommended reading the principles as probabilities rather than guarantees and said it was uncertain whether they apply at all scales. Ostrom's successful cases were often small, stable communities with long histories, and Törbel's boundary rules worked partly by excluding outsiders. Even the wintering rule could become unequal: in Swiss commons more generally, it increasingly favored large livestock owners as pasture became scarce ("Common land in Switzerland," 2026). Local institutions are not automatically fair, and local elites can dominate them just as national elites dominate national ones.

As an illustration, consider a school district that lets each school's staff, parents, and students set part of their own discipline policy within district guidelines. Each school has a committee that monitors how the rules are applied, gives warnings before stronger consequences, and offers a clear appeals process. Once a year, the schools share results and revise their rules based on what worked. The arrangement follows several of Ostrom's principles: rules that fit local conditions, collective choice, accountable monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict resolution, and nested governance. It does not end conflict, but it gives the people most affected the power to resolve it.

It also requires district oversight to make sure a few influential families do not take over a committee.

The evidence supports the claim that distributed governance can sustain cooperation without domination, especially when it follows the principles Ostrom documented and later studies largely confirmed. Some communities have governed shared resources for centuries, and farmer-run systems in Nepal have outperformed systems run by trained engineers. The research also shows that these institutions work as combinations of principles rather than as a checklist, that they can reproduce inequality if no one watches for it, and that they depend on ongoing participation. All of these mechanisms require people who know how to monitor, deliberate, resolve disputes, and design fair rules. Those skills are not innate. They must be learned. Chapter 17 argues that education is the foundation of every system described in Part Five and proposes a learning cycle designed to build the skills that self-governance requires.

Chapter 16: Distributed Governance

Summary: Chapter 16 examines communities that govern shared resources without a central ruler or private ownership. Ostrom's research, including the centuries-old alpine commons of Törbel, Switzerland, challenged Hardin's "tragedy of the commons." In Nepal, farmer-run irrigation systems produced higher rice yields and delivered water more fairly to tail-end users than agency-run systems. Reviews by Cox and colleagues and by Baggio and colleagues found broad support for Ostrom's design principles, though the principles work in combination rather than as a checklist. The chapter notes failures as well: McGinnis documents limits of polycentric governance, and even Törbel's rules came to favor larger owners. Distributed governance can work, but it requires ongoing effort.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why might people who use a resource every day manage it better than a distant authority?
2. What shared resources in your community, such as parks, classrooms, or online spaces, could be governed this way?
3. How can a fair system slowly come to favor its most powerful members, as happened in Törbel?
4. What skills would ordinary people need to govern something together successfully?

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Chapter 17 Education as the Answer

Chapter 16 showed that self-governing institutions depend on people who can monitor, deliberate, resolve conflicts, and design fair rules, and that these skills are not innate. This chapter argues that such capacities must be taught, which makes education the foundation of every check on domination described in this book. The central claim is that schools can either train people to accept hierarchy passively or teach them the skills to question, understand, and improve the systems they live in. The evidence suggests that the second kind of education works best not when students are left to discover everything on their own, but when strong foundational knowledge is combined with guided inquiry and real practice in self-governance. This book proposes a learning cycle built on that principle.

The proposed cycle has seven stages: basic skills, inquiry, research, discussion, reflection, application, and refinement. Basic skills include reading, writing, mathematics, and factual knowledge, and they supply the tools for everything that follows. Inquiry teaches students to ask good questions. Research teaches them to find and weigh evidence. Discussion teaches them to test ideas with others who may disagree. Reflection teaches them to examine their own assumptions and biases. Application asks them to use what they have learned in real situations. Refinement asks them to revise their ideas and actions based on results, which begins the cycle again. Each stage corresponds to a skill that self-governing communities require.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire provides the clearest argument for why this kind of education matters politically. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire (1970) criticized what he called the "banking" concept of education, in which teachers deposit information into students who passively receive, file, and store it. He argued that this model trains people to adapt to the world as it is rather than to understand or change it. In its place, he proposed problem-posing education, in which teachers and students investigate real problems together. Through this process, students come to see their circumstances not as fixed facts but as conditions they can analyze and transform. Freire's argument connects directly to this book's thesis: a population trained only to receive information is easier to manage through the beliefs and justifications described in earlier chapters.

The American philosopher John Dewey made a related argument from a different tradition. In Democracy and Education, Dewey (1916) argued that people learn most deeply through experience followed by reflection, and that schools should be places where students practice the habits of democratic life rather than simply study them. He described democracy as "more than a form of government" and as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, Chapter 7). For Dewey, a school organized around obedience could not be expected to produce citizens capable of governing themselves. Freire and Dewey came from different political traditions, but both concluded that the way a school is organized teaches lessons about power that are as important as anything in the formal curriculum.

Research on active learning supports parts of this approach. In a meta-analysis of 225 studies of undergraduate science, engineering, and mathematics courses, Freeman et al. (2014) found that student performance on examinations and concept inventories increased by 0.47 standard

deviations under active learning, which corresponds to an average improvement of about 6% in exam scores. Average failure rates were 21.8% in courses with active learning and 33.8% in courses with traditional lecturing, meaning students in lecture courses were about 1.5 times more likely to fail. These results held across disciplines and class sizes, although the benefits were greatest in classes of 50 or fewer students. The authors noted that if these studies had been medical trials, they might have been stopped early because the benefit was so clear.

Evidence from secondary schools points in a similar direction for civic skills. Using data from a major international civic education study, Campbell (2008) found that an open classroom climate, in which students discuss political and social issues and hear a range of views, was associated with greater civic knowledge, greater appreciation of political conflict, and stronger intentions to become informed voters, even after controlling for many student, school, and district characteristics. An open climate also partly offset the disadvantages faced by students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Research on how inquiry should be structured adds an important qualification. In two meta-analyses covering 164 studies, Alfieri et al. (2011) found that enhanced discovery, meaning inquiry supported by feedback, worked examples, scaffolding, or prompts to explain reasoning, produced better learning than other forms of instruction (d = 0.30), and guided discovery in particular showed an effect of d = 0.50.

The learning cycle connects directly to earlier chapters. Inquiry and research help students recognize the beliefs and justifications discussed in Chapters 9 through 11, including the tendency to defend systems that harm one's own group. Discussion builds the shared identity that Reicher and Haslam found essential for resisting tyranny, discussed in Chapter 13, and open discussion gives students practice disagreeing without domination. Application and refinement practice the rule-making, monitoring, and graduated sanctions that Ostrom documented in Chapter 16. The bystander research in Chapter 6 also suggests that students who know how to act together are better able to resist bullying. In this sense, a classroom can become a small model of self-governance, just as the schoolyard in Part Two was a small model of domination.

There are serious challenges to this argument. Kirschner et al. (2006) reviewed evidence showing that minimally guided instruction, in which students are expected to discover knowledge largely on their own, is often less effective than direct, explicit teaching, especially for beginners who lack background knowledge. Alfieri et al. (2011) reached a similar conclusion: when unassisted discovery was compared with explicit instruction, outcomes favored explicit instruction (d = -0.38). The Freeman et al. (2014) findings come from undergraduate courses and compare lecture-only teaching with any active learning, so they do not show which methods work best for younger students. Campbell's (2008) findings are correlational and cannot prove that classroom climate causes civic engagement. Freire's work is a philosophical and political argument rather than an empirical study, and critics have questioned how directly it can be applied in modern schools. Finally, education alone cannot overcome the inequalities in funding, housing, and health described in Chapter 14.

As an illustration, imagine a middle school class studying the school's own cell phone policy. Students first learn the policy and review basic research on phones and attention, with direct instruction from the teacher (basic skills). They develop questions about whether the policy is fair and effective (inquiry), survey classmates and teachers using a teacher-reviewed

questionnaire (research), and debate their findings in a structured discussion where every view is heard (discussion). They then examine how their own phone habits might bias their conclusions (reflection), present a revised policy proposal to the principal and student council (application), and evaluate the results after a semester (refinement). Throughout the project, the teacher provides guidance and feedback rather than leaving students to work everything out alone. In the process, students practice each of the skills a self-governing community requires.

The evidence supports a balanced conclusion. Education can build the knowledge, skills, and habits that self-governance requires, and active, inquiry-based learning has real benefits when it is guided and grounded in strong basic knowledge. Unguided discovery, by contrast, often fails, which is why the proposed learning cycle begins with explicit instruction and moves gradually toward independent thinking, open discussion, and real-world application. Freire and Dewey supply the reasons this matters politically, and the research shows how to do it effectively. Education is not a complete answer to the problems of hierarchy, but it may be the most important foundation for every other answer, because every check on power depends on people who know how to use it. The book began with a question about protection: how can people organize for safety without letting the need for safety justify domination? The Conclusion returns to that question by asking what happens when an ordinary person, educated to think and question, decides to stop pretending that the promise of protection is being kept.

Chapter 17: Education as the Answer

Summary: Chapter 17 argues that the skills self-governance requires, such as questioning, deliberating, resolving conflict, and designing fair rules, must be taught. That makes education the foundation of every check on domination. Freeman and colleagues' meta-analysis of 225 studies found that active learning raised exam scores and cut failure rates from about 34 percent to 22 percent. Campbell found that open classroom discussion predicts later civic engagement. Alfieri and colleagues found that unguided discovery learning performs poorly, while guided inquiry works well, which echoes the warnings of Kirschner and colleagues. Drawing on Dewey and Freire, the chapter concludes that schools can teach either passive acceptance or active participation.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did your own schooling mostly teach you to follow rules or to question them? Give an example.
2. Why might guided inquiry work better than both pure lecture and fully unguided discovery?
3. How can teachers create open discussion without losing structure or authority?
4. If schools are themselves hierarchies, can they truly teach students to question hierarchy?

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Conclusion: What Happens When Someone Questions the Promise of Protection?

This book began with a question about protection: how can people organize for safety without letting the need for safety justify domination? Chapter 17 argued that education can give people the skills to examine the systems they live in. The Conclusion asks what happens when someone uses those skills. Its central claim is that hierarchies built on legitimacy are vulnerable to a simple act: ordinary people refusing to pretend. Consent is the cheapest and most effective tool a hierarchy has, as Chapter 10 argued. When enough people stop performing belief in a system that no longer protects them, that tool begins to fail. Refusal works best when it is collective, organized, and sustained, and even then it is not guaranteed to succeed.

The clearest statement of this idea comes from Václav Havel, the Czech playwright and dissident who later became president of Czechoslovakia. In his 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless," Havel (1985) describes a greengrocer who places a sign in his shop window reading "Workers of the world, unite!" The greengrocer does not believe the slogan and has no interest in its meaning. He displays it because everyone does, because it is expected, and because leaving it out might cause trouble. Havel argues that the sign is not really a message about workers. It is a signal of obedience: a way for the greengrocer to show that he is reliable and will cause no problems. The slogan gives that obedience a respectable face, so that he can submit without having to admit to himself that he is submitting.

Havel's insight was that the whole system depended on millions of such small performances. The regime did not need everyone to believe its ideology. It needed everyone to act as if they did. If the greengrocer one day stops putting up the sign, stops voting in elections he knows are meaningless, and begins to say what he thinks, he does more than express a private opinion. He shows that the performance is only a performance, which threatens the system because it shows others that refusal is possible. Havel called this "living within the truth" and argued that it was dangerous precisely because so many people secretly shared the greengrocer's doubts. Under such conditions, he wrote, even a single honest act could have consequences far beyond what its author intended (Havel, 1985).

This connects directly to the research discussed throughout the book. Like the hidden transcripts Scott (1990) described in Chapter 11, the greengrocer's private disbelief already exists before he acts, and refusing the sign makes it public. Like the defenders in Salmivalli et al.'s (1996) research in Chapter 6, a single act of refusal can change what others believe is acceptable, because most bystanders privately disapprove of what they see. Like Tyler's (2006) findings on legitimacy in Chapter 10, Havel's account shows that systems based on consent weaken when consent is visibly withdrawn. And like the obedience research in Chapter 13, where Milgram found that obedience collapsed when peers refused, Havel's account suggests that each refusal makes the next one easier.

Historical evidence suggests that such refusal can be powerful when it is collective. Studying 323 major violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) found that nonviolent campaigns succeeded 53% of the time, compared with 26% for violent campaigns. They argued that nonviolent movements succeed partly because they can attract broader participation, since joining them carries lower physical, moral, and practical barriers. Broad participation in turn encourages defections among those who sustain the regime, including security forces, civil servants, business leaders, and ordinary citizens. In the terms of this book, nonviolent campaigns succeed by withdrawing the consent on which legitimacy depends. When a regime uses violence against peaceful protesters, it often loses support, because the violence reveals that its promise of protection has become a threat.

Havel's own life illustrates both the costs and the possibilities of refusal. He was a founding spokesman for Charter 77, a 1977 declaration that called on the Czechoslovak government to respect the human rights it had formally promised to uphold. The declaration did not call for revolution. It asked the state to keep its own promises, which made it difficult to condemn openly. Havel was imprisoned several times, including a sentence of several years beginning in 1979. In November 1989, during the largely nonviolent Velvet Revolution, mass demonstrations and a general strike led the Communist government of Czechoslovakia to give up power, and in December 1989 Havel was elected president. A system that had seemed permanent turned out to depend on people's continued willingness to play their part.

There are important cautions. Refusal is costly, and the people who refuse first often suffer for it, as Havel did. Chenoweth and Stephan's findings describe average outcomes, and many nonviolent movements have been crushed. Later research by Chenoweth (2020) found that the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance has declined: from the 1960s until about 2010, success rates for nonviolent revolutionary campaigns stayed above 40% and reached 65% in the 1990s, but since 2010 fewer than 34% have succeeded. Chenoweth attributed this decline partly to governments learning to counter movements and partly to changes within movements themselves, including smaller peak participation, overreliance on mass demonstrations, and organizing through social media without the slower work of building coalitions. Violent campaigns declined even more, succeeding only about 8% of the time since 2010, so nonviolence still outperformed violence. But refusal is a strategy, not a guarantee. Questioning a system also does not ensure that what replaces it will be better, because, as Chapter 12 warned, movements that challenge one hierarchy can create new hierarchies of their own.

As an illustration, imagine a school where everyone knows the anti-bullying policy is not enforced, but staff members continue to praise it at meetings because that is expected. Like the greengrocer's sign, the praise is a performance that everyone recognizes and no one challenges. One teacher finally says, calmly and publicly, that the policy is not working, and she describes specific incidents she has seen. Several colleagues who had privately agreed begin to speak. Together they bring data on reported incidents to the principal and propose a revised approach based on the research described in Chapters 6 and 7. Within a semester, the school changes its practices. The policy did not fail because one teacher spoke, since it had already failed. Her refusal simply made the failure visible. The change happened because others joined her, and because they had evidence and a workable proposal rather than complaints alone.

Taken together, the arguments of this book form a consistent picture. People need groups for protection and belonging. Groups distribute protection unequally through status, which can be earned through prestige or taken through dominance, and the same patterns appear in schoolyards, workplaces, and nations. Small groups have long restrained dominance through ridicule, refusal, and exit. Large societies rely instead on belief and legitimacy, which are cheaper than force but can also protect unfair arrangements and lead people to defend systems that harm them. A person's freedom, health, and happiness depend partly on their position in these systems. Yet history and research also show that hierarchies can be checked, that governance can be distributed, and that people can be educated to question and redesign the systems they live in. Each of these remedies depends on the same human capacity: the willingness of ordinary people to notice when a promise is not being kept and to act on that knowledge together.

The answer to the book's central question, then, is neither that hierarchy can be abolished nor that it must be accepted. The promise of protection has to be tested continually. Groups remain fair only when their members keep the knowledge, connections, and courage to ask whether the promise is being kept, and to act together when it is not. The evidence suggests that such action succeeds most often when it is collective, nonviolent, well organized, and supported by institutions designed to hear it. The greengrocer's decision to take down his sign is, in the end, the same choice made by the student who says "That's not funny," the teacher who speaks up at a meeting, and the community that rewrites its own rules. It is the oldest human check on power, and it remains the most important.

Conclusion: What Happens When Someone Questions the Promise of Protection?

Summary: The Conclusion returns to the book's opening question. If hierarchies are justified by the promise of protection, their power depends on people continuing to believe that promise. Havel's story of the greengrocer who stops displaying a slogan shows how one person's refusal to pretend can expose a system built on performed belief. Chenoweth and Stephan's study of 323 campaigns found that nonviolent resistance succeeded about 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent campaigns. Chenoweth's later work shows that success rates have fallen since 2010. Connecting bystanders in schools to citizens in states, the book concludes that hierarchy is natural, but so is refusal, and education and organization decide whether refusal succeeds.

Discussion Questions:

1. What would it cost you personally to stop "displaying the slogan" in a group you belong to?
2. Why might nonviolent movements succeed more often than violent ones?
3. If nonviolent success rates have declined since 2010, what might have changed?
4. Looking back across the book, what is the most important thing one ordinary person can do to limit the abuse of power?

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Glossary

Discovery learning: Instruction in which students find ideas on their own. Research suggests it works best with guidance. (Chapter 17)

Distributed governance: Shared decision-making in which authority is spread across many people or levels, not held at one top. (Chapter 16)

Dominance: A path to status through fear, force, or intimidation. (Chapters 3, 5)

Dunbar's number: The estimate that people can keep about 150 stable social relationships. Beyond that, groups need other tools to hold together. (Chapter 8)

Guided inquiry: Student-led investigation with teacher structure, feedback, and scaffolding. (Chapter 17)

Hidden transcript: Scott's term for the private criticism that less powerful people voice away from those in charge. (Conclusion)

Legitimacy: The belief that an authority has the right to rule and should be obeyed. (Chapters 10, 15)

Leveling mechanisms: Group behaviors, such as ridicule, gossip, shunning, and removal, used to keep would-be leaders in check. (Chapters 4, 15)

Moralizing gods: Belief in watchful, punishing deities. Some argue it helped large societies cooperate, but the evidence is disputed. (Chapter 9)

Nonviolent resistance: Organized refusal, protest, and noncooperation without armed force. (Conclusion)

Open classroom climate: A classroom where students feel free to discuss and disagree about public issues. (Chapter 17)

Participant roles: Salmivalli's categories in bullying: bully, assistant, reinforcer, outsider, defender, and victim. (Chapter 6)

Polycentric governance: A system with many overlapping centers of decision-making. (Chapter 16)

Prestige: A path to status through skill, knowledge, or generosity that others freely respect. (Chapters 3, 4)

Procedural justice: The view that people accept authority more when its processes feel fair, respectful, and neutral. (Chapter 10)

Promise of protection: The bargain in which people accept a hierarchy in return for safety. The book's closing question tests it. (Conclusion)

Reverse dominance hierarchy: Boehm's term for small egalitarian societies in which the group as a whole controls ambitious individuals. (Chapters 4, 15)

Social currency: The idea that status works like money. It is earned, traded, and spent to gain influence and resources. (Chapter 2)

Social gradient in health: The pattern in which health gets worse at each step down the status ladder. (Chapter 14)

Status: A person's standing in a group, based on respect, admiration, and influence. (Chapters 2, 3, 14)

System justification: The tendency to defend existing social arrangements, even ones that harm one's own group. (Chapter 11)

Term-limit evasion: Attempts by leaders to stay in office past their legal limits. (Chapter 15)

Whole-school program: An anti-bullying approach, such as KiVa, that changes the norms of the whole school, not only individual students. (Chapter 7)