Growth and Collapse of Societal Power

Professor Derek K Hitchins

THE FOCUS OF POWER

Homo sapiens sapiens is instinctively gregarious. It is our nature to group together, inherited no doubt from our simian forebears.
Our human instincts generate fundamental, inescapable urges:—

- **To propagate**—described by some as the prime directive. Families exist to nurture and protect offspring, and band together for mutual protection

- **To create the (perception of) order**. Recent research shows this to be the principle goal of human left-brain cortex. (Gazzaniga, 1998) Indeed the human cortex is so intent on creating perceived order that it will "invent" information to fill lacunas, so fabricating a logical set of factors, or sequence of events, activities, etc. This feature, no doubt an evolved survival capability, puts into serious question our veracity as witnesses and suggests that human logic may be less objective than we like to believe.

- **To control local environment**. We have a need to create (a perception of) surrounding order. This is observable at every turn. Essentially, we are still the hunter-gatherer, having adjusted our environment to fit. So, supermarket aisles now serve as hedgerows from which to pick our food. Board rooms serve as meeting places for hunting groups bent on seizing some prize quarry.

- **To extend the domain of order**, i.e. extend control and dominion. This may also be an evolved urge, designed to ward-off enemies and to guarantee resources. Be that as it may, humans exhibit this characteristic in infant development, bonding, self-assertion, control freaking, empire building

With such fundamentally assertive natures, it would be surprising if we did not develop powerful and quarrelsome groups.

THE GROWTH OF POWER

It is helpful in understanding the growth of power to call upon a model of social interaction and behaviour, the Social Genotype© .

The Social Genotype©—Basis of Identity, Culture and Adaptive Social Behaviour

The Social Genotype© (Hitchins, 1995) is an analogy to, perhaps even and extension of, the more familiar double helix, DNA. This remarkable molecule contains our patterns or genotypes, which are expressed in the identity of an individual.

Instead of nucleotides and hydrogen bonds, the Social Genotype$^©$ is comprised of individuals, their rôles and their mutual relationships. In a similar way, too, the Social Genotype$^©$ is expressed in the identity and culture of the social group.

Rôles / groups and relationships form stable, palpable structures. In place of the hydrogen bond, which mediates the attraction between nucleotides, Social Genotype$^©$ relationships are mediated by shared beliefs, mutually bonding the respective rôle-holders.

Social Genotype$^©$—Aspects

The Social Genotype$^©$ takes time to form within a nascent social group, and time to set—typically 5-7 years for start-up organizations. Once set, it evolves only slowly, and resists rapid change. The rôle-relationship mesh is "glued" by shared beliefs. It determines the identity/culture/behaviour of society or group.

Individual behaviour is coloured by these cultural norms. New arrivals or recruits are accepted only if "likely to fit in". New Recruits "learn the ropes"—adopt their appropriate rôle—or are ejected from the group—"immune response"

Because of this, individuals may come and go, but the rôle-relationship structure goes on (c.f. body cells replaced, identity of individual remains). So, the pattern of group behaviour remains unchanged. In effect, the rôle-relationship structure is virtually eternal, just so long as there is a continuing supply of replacement individuals. And, in a way not dissimilar to genes, the shared beliefs live on in future generations

Examples of this longevity are to be found in (e.g.) church services that have remained unchanged since AD 330. The language has changed, the buildings and the people have come and gone, but the service pattern goes on, even when participants may have little understanding of its meaning. The Law, stock exchange, banking, parliament, Scottish antipathy toward the English…all show consistent behaviour and slow evolution over hundreds of years, indicative of the Social Genotype$^©$

The Nature of Belief

Beliefs permit rapid reaction in uncertain situations. Our belief systems are an essential contribution to survival. *Homo sapiens* evolved through fight or flight decisions based on ability to categorize and stereotype swiftly.

Beliefs persist if they give "satisfactory explanations". Belief in drugs, crime, music, youth…are tenable *so long as* they *work*, i.e. provide acceptable answers to complex problems and situations. "Ground truth", whatever that term might mean, is *irrelevant*. Belief need be neither rational nor logical. Social and political analysts find this difficult to accept, but it is demonstrably true.

"New" beliefs are continually being generated and tested without check in an individuated society with no institutionalized counter such as a set of ethics and morals emanating from a religion.

Beliefs appear to be vigorously self-perpetuating through generations. The obvious mechanism is in Social Genotype. Examples abound:—

Figure 1. The Behaviour Management Model from the Generic Reference Model
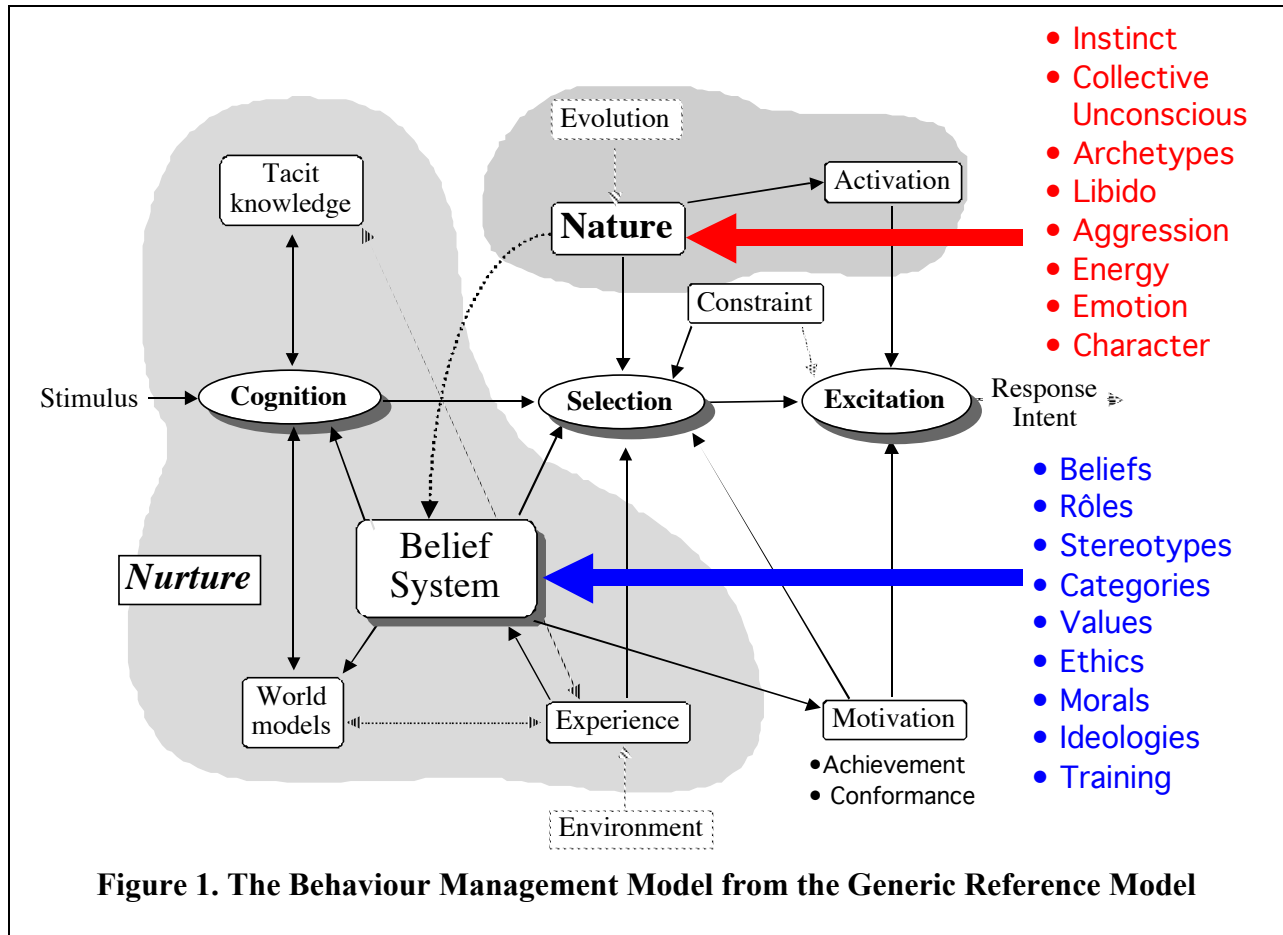
- N. Ireland, with its adherence to, and aggressive celebration of, events of 300 years ago

- Yugoslavia, where differing beliefs and cultures survived Tito's communist rule, only to break out in ethnic conflict

- Russian Religion, where the faithful had forgotten the ritual of worship under communist domination, but were so intent that priests were brought in to teach the rituals anew

- Etc. Examples abound at every turn—discovering them is a game for all to play.

GRM—Behaviour Management

The Generic Reference Model (Hitchins, 1992) is a general view of any system. It comprises three views: being, doing thinking. The model shown in Figure 1 represents the thinking viewpoint only, and presents a reference for how individuals and groups select response to particular stimulus.

At left, a stimulus is interpreted in the light of stored world models, tacit knowledge and individual or shared group beliefs. Behavioural response is presented as a nature/nurture interaction, with belief acting pivotally in support of nurture. The connection from nurture to belief system represents the

central influence of (Jung's) archetypes and collective unconscious, however: this suggests that beliefs can be entertained only if they are compatible with essential, evolved human emotion. A particular behavioural response is selected and excited, i.e. activated through the other parts of the GRM.

Principle features of both Nature and Belief System are shown in the figure. Note, in particular, that training can and does influence belief, to the extent that the belief system can considered "second nature". Military training, in particular, may encourage extended groups of people to believe in, and hence behave in, much the same way, even though this way may be contrary to their nature. Hence training acts as an effective nucleus for the growth of military power.

BATTLES BETWEEN BELIEF SYSTEMS

Sustaining Belief
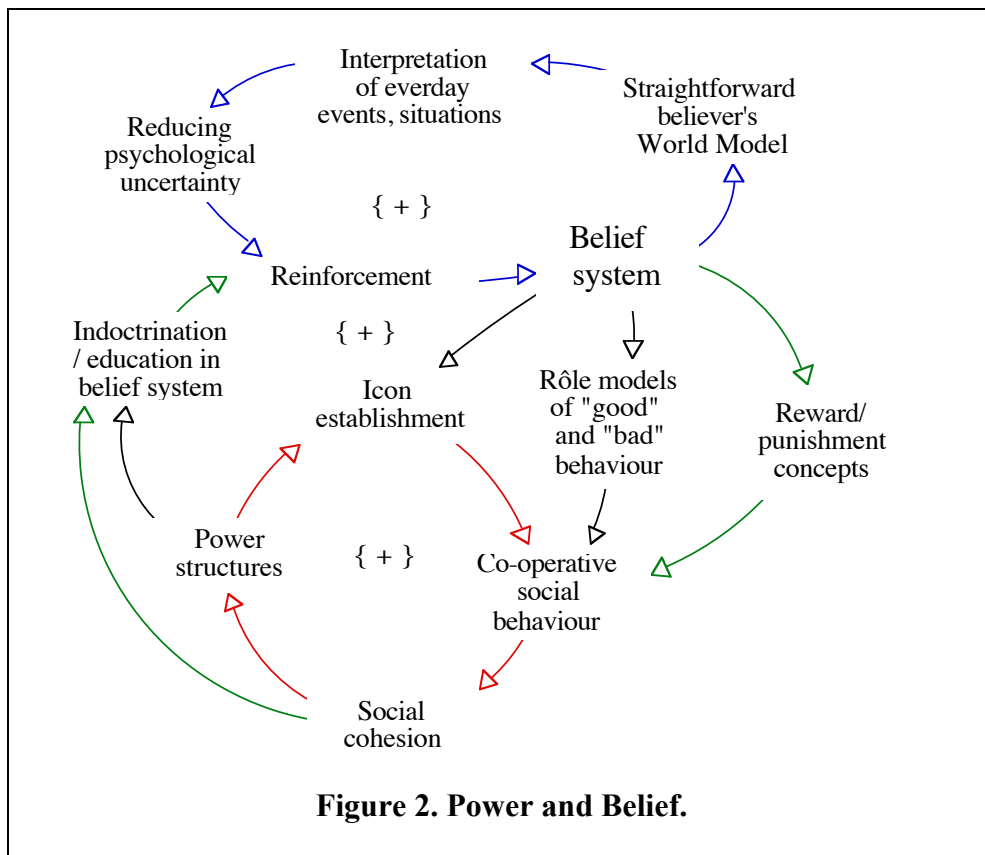

Figure 2. Power and Belief.

Figure 2 shows how belief is self-sustaining. The figure comprises three main loops, forming a closed double helix. Consider the top loop first. Beliefs offer believers a simple explanation of everyday events and situations, which reduces their fear and uncertainty. Every time belief "works" it reinforces the believer's faith.

Belief systems do more; they generate rôle models of good and bad behaviour, where those terms have to be seen in their social context. What is "good" in, say, business ethics may not be considered good

in a wider social context. Belief systems similarly generate concepts of reward and punishment, generally for good and bad behaviour respectively. Finally, belief systems often seem to generate icons, representations of the belief, which might vary from General Montgomery's cap badges during WWII, to product brand images, to concepts such as "the mother of parliaments".
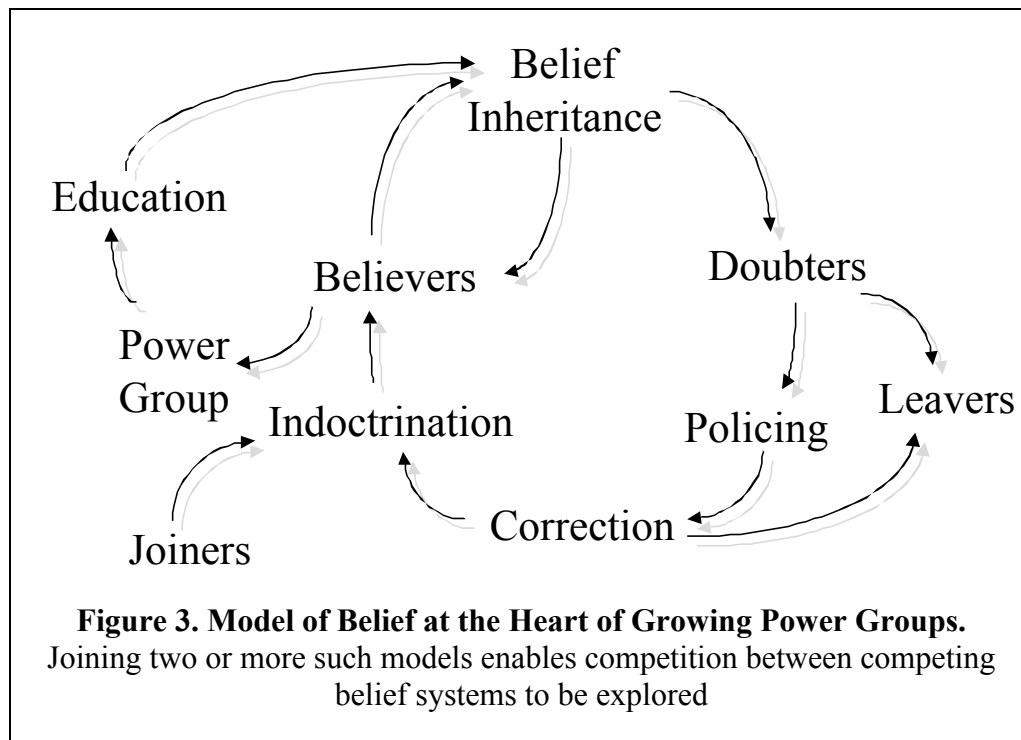
Together these three features emerging from belief systems encourage conformity, co-operative social behaviour and social cohesion. The latter permits the growth of power groups, which reinforce the icon and extend their dominion through indoctrination, or education, of others to the belief.

The whole forms a triple, inter-linked, self-sustaining structure maintaining order, promoting power and reinforcing belief. This is the basis of Establishment power, of course, but it applies equally to business organizations, gangs, etc. It is noteworthy that discussions in the UK about the rôle of the Church often suggest that it should not established and that bishops should not sit/vote in the House of Lords. Figure 2 would suggest that the Establishment would be wise to identify just what its replacement beliefs are, before dispensing with the traditional set.

Central Rôle of Belief

Beliefs emerge to explain the unexplainable. Humans find them essential to provide "instant" explanations of complex or obscure phenomena. Without such explanations we would experience uncertainty and fear, or would take so long to work things out that we would be at risk from delay.

Beliefs propagate a *comforting perception* of order, understanding and control. Perhaps because of this, in part at least, culture and power build around powerful ideas, ideologies and beliefs. Shared Beliefs, it

Figure 3. Model of Belief at the Heart of Growing Power Groups.
Joining two or more such models enables competition between competing belief systems to be explored

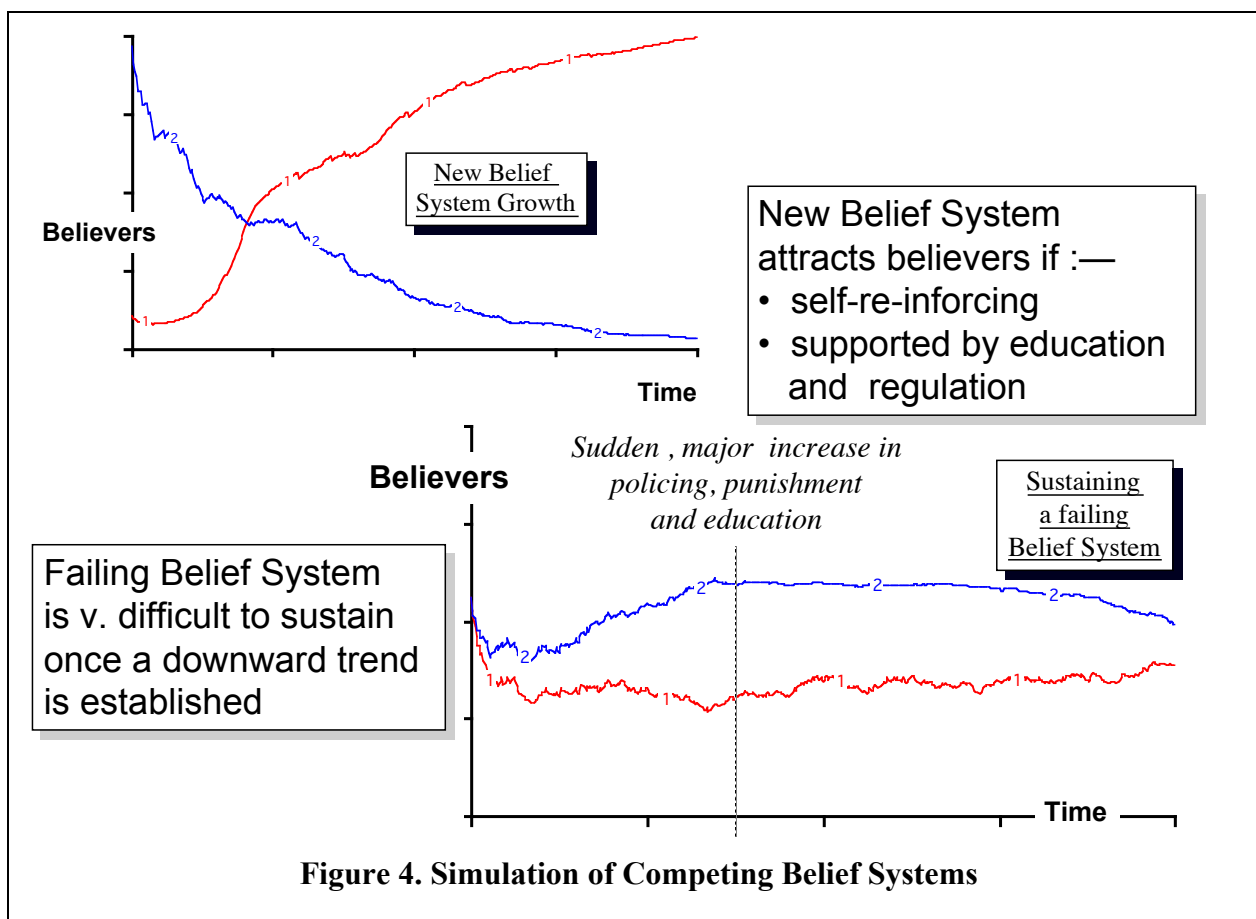seems, are at the heart of social power, for both good and evil

Similarly, opposing beliefs are at the heart of power struggles, as competing parties seek to impose their view of order and dominion over each other. Fundamentally, then, conflict is a "battle between belief systems".

This is entirely consistent with Clausewitz's view that "war is an extension of politics".

Competing Belief Systems

Figure 3 shows a sketch of a more complex model of the growth of power groups. The sketch is largely self explanatory. Note the rôles of education in creating new believers, indoctrination in converting new joiners, and policing in correcting "doubters". In each case, terms such as education, indoctrination and policing are used in a non-pejorative sense. Each may be formal or informal, according to the situation being represented.

Figure 4 shows the results of two quite different simulation runs, using the same model to represent different situations. At top left are the results of two belief systems interacting where the "new" belief is much stronger than the established belief. As might be expected, the new belief swiftly captures the

New Belief System Growth

New Belief System attracts believers if :—
• self-re-inforcing
• supported by education and regulation

Sudden , major increase in policing, punishment and education

Sustaining a failing Belief System

Failing Belief System is v. difficult to sustain once a downward trend is established

**Figure 4. Simulation of Competing Belief Systems**

population. This study investigated the so-called Branch Davidian group that ended in such a disaster at Waco, Texas.

The other simulation is subtler. The lower line represents an established belief system being gradually overtaken by some alternative belief system, such as belief in drugs, youth supremacy, etc. At the point of the vertical dotted line, the establishment wakes up to its situation and seeks to reverse its decline by introducing harder policing, draconian laws, changing the education system. The model shows that the expected reversal of fortunes does not occur immediately, and may in fact take decades, even hundreds of years. It may indeed be unsuccessful, even although the establishment seems to have the state organs of power at its disposal.

MAINTAINING POWER

Power, Belief and Ma'at in the New Kingdom

It may seem whimsical to introduce ideas from ancient Egypt into such a discussion. There is reason, however.

Figure 5. Maintaining Power in the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt
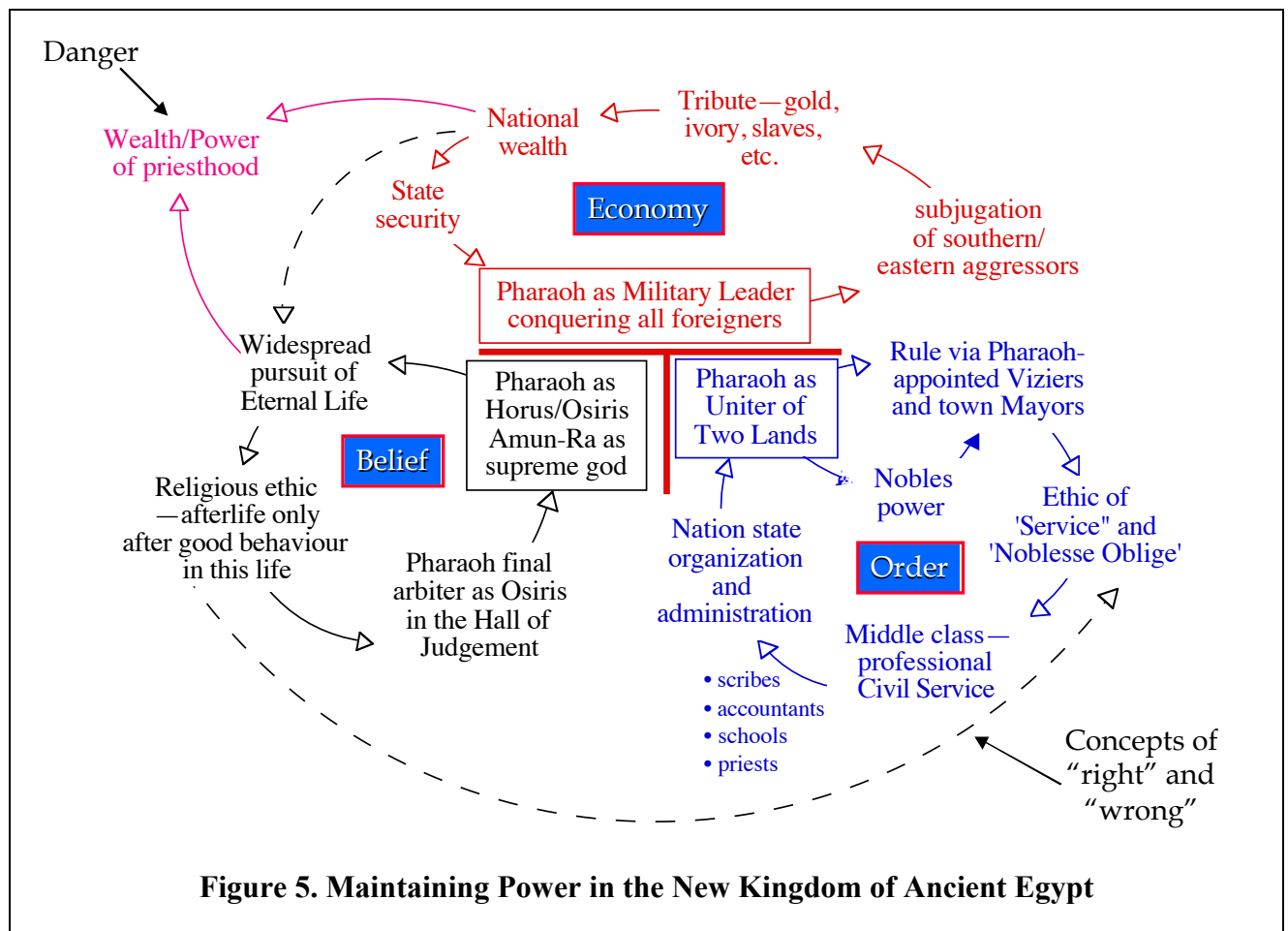
- Such instances are unlikely to cause offence, unlike many contemporary instances

- Egypt was emerging from the Stone Age into the Bronze Age at the time, and had evolved socially in rather splendid isolation. In consequence, their social behaviour can be viewed in retrospect almost as a pristine experiment in basic human nature and behaviour, unsullied by modern social and economic overlays.

- Egyptian society endured for over 3,500 years, a record yet to be matched

As Figure 5 shows, the basis for enduring power was essentially three-fold: order, economy and (shared) belief.

The ancient Egyptians had an important idea: Ma'at. Today, we find it difficult to understand just what Ma'at meant, but it was to do with order, harmony, truth and integrity. The responsibility for Ma'at was with everyone in the land, but it was vested particularly in the Pharaoh.

Economy was similarly central. Prior to the New Kingdom, the largely agrarian economy had been bound up exclusively with the Nile and its annual Inundation. Poor or excessive floods led to shortages, even famine. By the New Kingdom, international conquest and tribute had expanded economic horizons and Egypt was exceedingly wealthy. This wealth was poured largely into the building of temples and the worship of gods, all in the pursuit of eternal life. That prospect depended upon leading a blameless life, which promoted though Ma'at the protection of widows and children, co-operation and moderation. (Many of the factors contributing to each other and hence to the long-lived cultural stability of the New Kingdom are singularly and significantly absent from our contemporary UK culture.)

The very concept of belief in after life eventually led to downfall. Spending vast fortunes on worship meant that priests and temples became wealthier and more powerful, eventually challenging the Pharaoh. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Generalized Rise and Fall of "Epochs"

We can draw some useful conclusions about the dynamics of power from such examples:—

- Epochs (periods of relative stability) are initiated by powerful leaders

- The "style" of an epoch is set by the initial leader, and endures long after they are succeeded (the Social Genotype© at work)

- Epoch stability depends on:
  - iconic, synergistic leadership
  - sound economy and infrastructure
  - shared collective unconscious / experience
  - group social ethics, morals and widely held beliefs

- Epoch breakdown is caused, on the other hand, by:

- fluctuating economy

- degradation of spirit

- loss of ethical, altruistic spirit…leading to…

- …internecine struggle, often leading to

- group weakness and

- invasion /take-over

During Societal Maturation—Overview

Social groups individuate, i.e. go through stages of development just like individuals. (Rice, 1990) Gradually, maturation leads to interests in power, to individuation, to challenge of cannon and traditions. With individuation come factions, energy absorption in internecine struggle, resistance to change, uncontrolled change, breakdown

Avoiding loss of control—leader's guide:—

- avoid promotion of subordinate, self-ruling groups

- create and manage infrastructure

- appoint/replace bureaucrats on merit, not inheritance

Such ideas and lessons have served throughout history. In medieval England, the relationship between King John and the Barons sets a prime example of losing control in a feudal power system.

SEEKING CONTEMPORARY ROOTS OF CONFLICT

Competitive Pressure to Individuate

Commercial pressure promotes societal factions by age, persuasion, sex:—

- sells more fashion, music, stationery, drugs…

- Competition seen as ideal:—

- Icon—lone individual against all odds

- Significantly, emergence of arcane beliefs—

  - LGM, UFOs, Corn Circles, Astrology, Pyramids, Black Magic, Ghosts, Crystals, Reflexology, Alternative Everything, Palmistry, Economics, Spiritualism, Management Science, TQM, BPR…

Evidently, people need some Belief System, and it need not be rational. The demise of formal, state religion in the UK is paralleled by this growth in magical, pagan beliefs. History shows quite clearly that a fragmenting belief system *is* a straightforward indicator of a fragmenting society—and hence the degradation of power.

Western Culture—on a Knife Edge

Figure 6 shows a causal loop model of western social dynamics, illustrating the growth and decay of power. The model is comprised of several interacting loops:

1. At right is a simple loop showing the self-sustaining basis of Social Cohesion, supporting establishment, institutionalized power groups which generate socializing ethics, beliefs, education and infrastructure to cement social cohesion.

2. Also at right, autonomous dynasties emerge, such as organized crime and international business, which promote internecine conflict for resources, potentially reducing social cohesion.

**Figure 6. Causal Loop Model (CLM) of Western Social Dynamics**
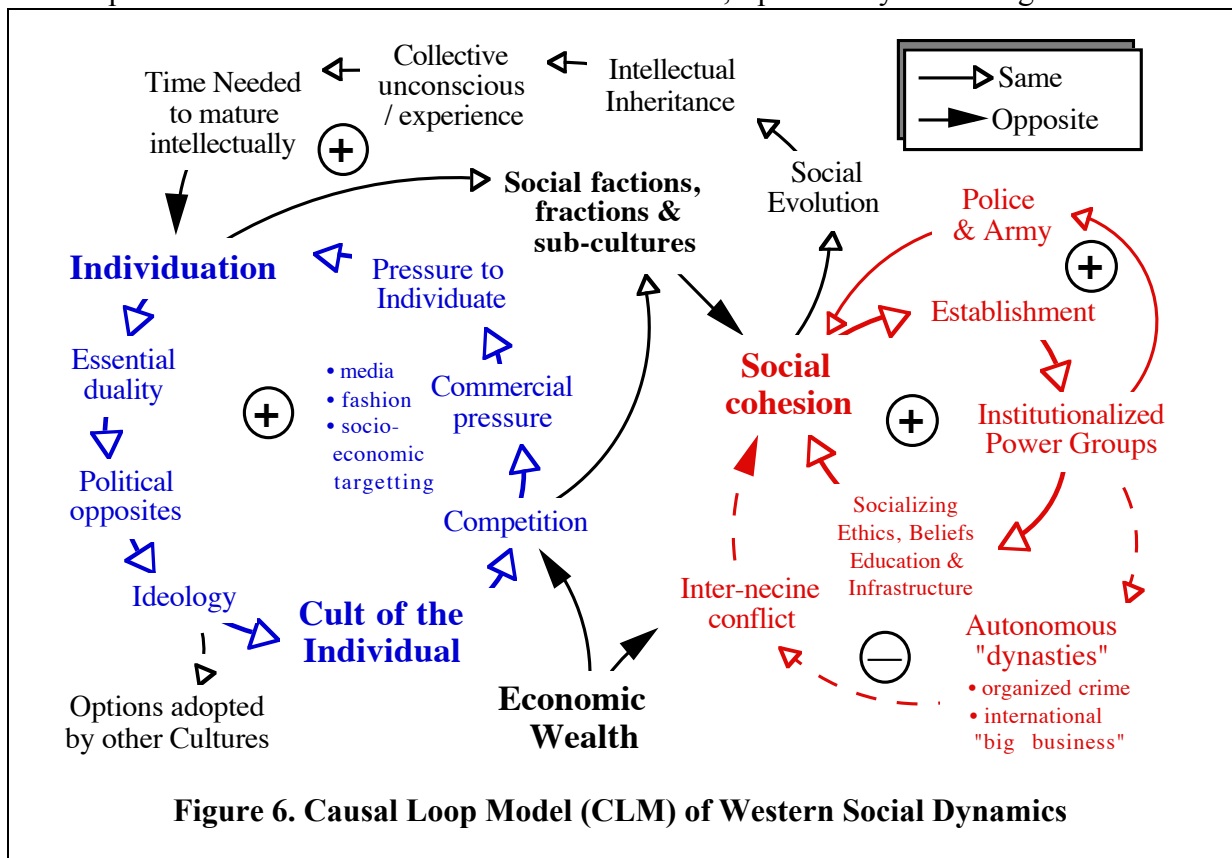
Significantly, the degree of conflict is reduced by general economic wealth

3. At left, a second self-sustaining loop is shown. This too is promoted by inadequate economy, which increases competition, increases commercial pressure, and leads to an increased pressure to individuate. (This is evident in the increased layers of maturation: only 50 years ago, puberty was accompanied by a rite of passage evidenced largely by a child adopting adult clothing, music, culture and behaviour. Today, it is possible to document at least ten distinct stages between childhood and full social maturity, each marked by distinctive icons, clothing, music, drugs, culture and behaviour.) The circle closes on itself through the contemporary "cult of the individual",

notably western in context, which promotes the rights of the individual over the value of co-operating to promote social benefit and order. This contrasts markedly with Ma'at, and with present day Asiatic and oriental cultures.

4. At top there is a link from Social Cohesion to Individuation. The fractionation of individual and group individuation means that it requires longer for the intellect to adapt, adjust and progress to maturity. Simply, there is more to learn, understand and grow beyond. This acts in direct opposition to the pressure to individuate more quickly under competitive pressure.

5. Both Individuation and Competition lead to social factions which threaten Social Cohesion

Figure 7. Simulation of Western Culture and Power Dynamics
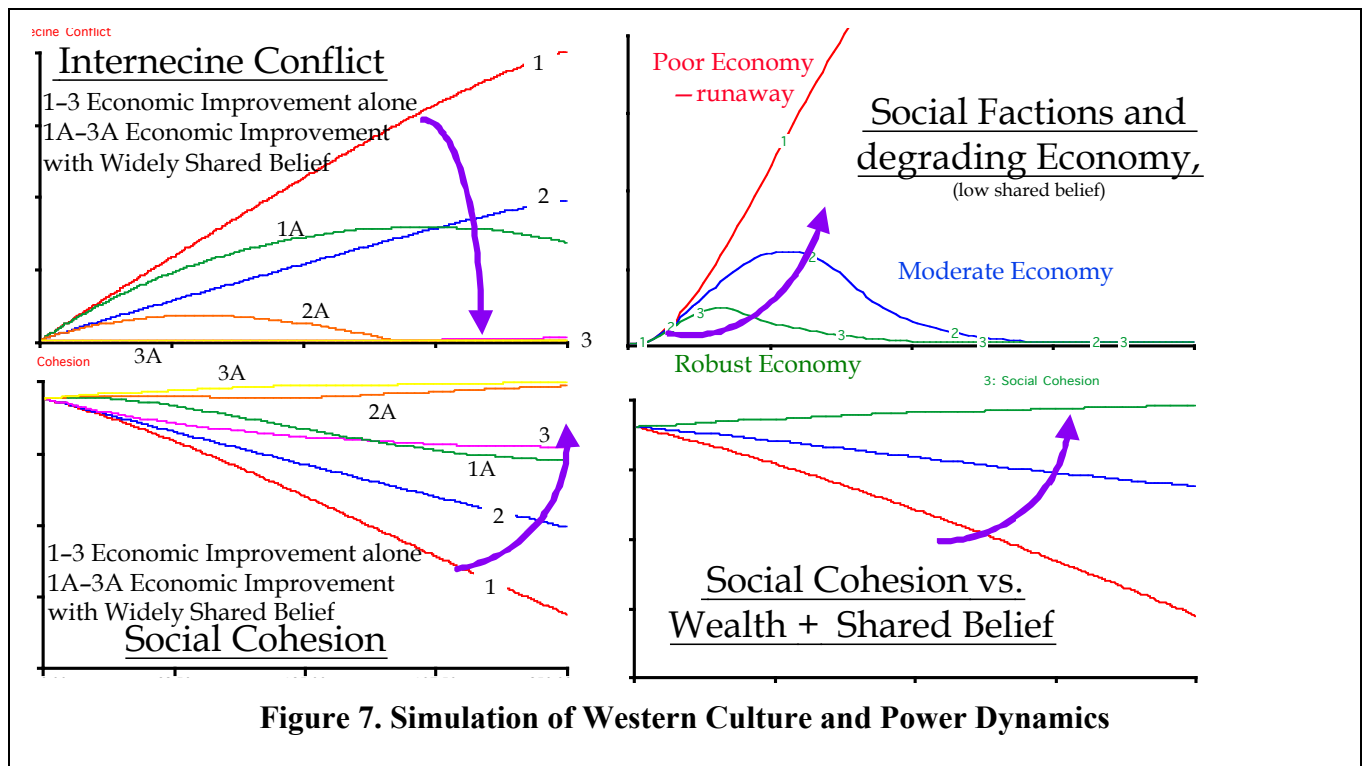
Western Culture—Simulation

The model of Figure 6 may be complex, but the results are straightforward—see Figure 7.

- Factions generate spontaneously, esp. in weaker economies owing to:
  - economic pressure for competition
  - individuation
  - degraded infrastructure

In addition, it emerges that:—

- Small changes in shared belief cause big changes in social behaviour, esp. with weak economy

- Stronger economies may still generate internecine strife, but need not lose social cohesion

- Robust Economy not enough—order, shared belief/ethic/behaviour pattern needed too

Dissolution of Power

Power can be destroyed in either of at least two ways:—

- Where belief provides social power focus (e.g. theocracy, ethnic/tribal enclave, *jihad*, gang):—

- Invalidation of the belief, or…

- overpowering by a demonstrably stronger belief

Where a power-system forms from complementary, interacting parts (e.g. army, economy, ecology, political ideology):—

- Rise of dominance leading to…

- suppression of interacting variety, leading to…

- inflexible system, unable to adapt to environmental change

Western Democracy

As a slightly tongue-in-cheek example of paradoxical influences that lead to states of social self-organizing criticality, (which characterize the emergence of conflict) consider Figure 8.

At right is shown the authoritarian culture that leads to parliamentary democracy, a form of democracy that is incongruent with the original Greek concept. In particular, human duality emerges in the two-party system, and the concept that one or other party must govern (not serve); moreover, they must have the power to ignore, even to override, the wishes of the majority once they are in power "for the public good".

Authoritarianism also evidences in capitalism, which can be viewed as a contemporary equivalent of feudalism, with individual owners and leaders of large and powerful organizations controlling large sections of the economy and population. This differs from ancient feudalism principally in its freedom from particular geographical land ownership, and consequently, too, in its ability to extend beyond the bounds of the traditional nation-state. In sum and substance, the ideas are very similar, however, and both arise naturally from the basic human traits listed at the beginning.

At left is shown the move to international democratization led by the USA in the belief that freedom and democracy are one. This drive is no doubt spurred on by the fact that no two democratic nations have ever waged war on each other (provided one employs the contemporary western interpretation of "democracy"). The ideas of freedom that the US fosters on an international scale have lead, and will lead, small groups within nations states to seek the independence they once had. In light of the Social Genotype[©] , this should be no surprise. The desire of previously independent groups for a return to their former state will have been kept alive within the Social Genotype[©], outliving individuals and

Figure 8. The Rise and Fall of Western Democracy?
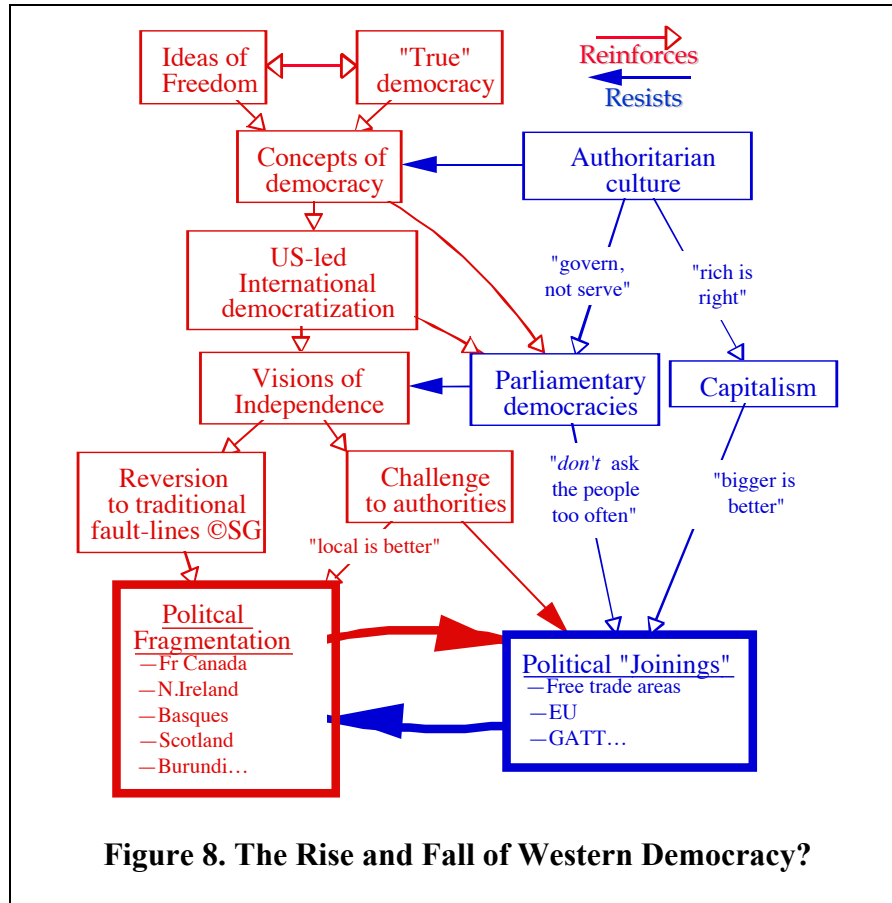
institutions, and surviving any attempts to eradicate it short of genocide—and even that has been tried in both Jugoslavia and W. Africa recently.

If Figure 8 has any validity, it reinforces the old Marxist platitude that capitalism "…contains the seeds of its own destruction…" Happily, or unhappily, this is true of any system, since none has eternal life. Mind you, that is no reason to court unnecessary downfall…

REFERENCES

Gazzaniga, Michael S., 1998, The Split Brain Revisited, Scientific American, **279**.1

Hitchins, D. K., 1992, Putting Systems to Work, Wiley and Sons, Chichester

Hitchins, D. K., 1995, *Belief Structures and Emergent Societal Conflict*, The First International Workshop on Low Intensity Conflict, Stockholm, Sweden, 29th-31st March 1995

Rice, Michael, 1990, Egypt's Making, Guild Publishing, London