

Saint Valentine, bonobos and private property

Valentine's Day is here again. Allegedly on this day in third century Rome the priest Valentinus was martyred for the crime of wedding a christian to a heathen – he knew it wasn't allowed, but he just couldn't go against true love! – and now you get to be in a fight with your partner for forgetting this was no ordinary February Wednesday. But, tenuous origins and petty fights aside, the rather commercialised holiday derived from this myth is a welcome boon to the otherwise drab and dreary second month of the year. It might be unclear how many people actually reveal their hitherto secret admiring on this day, but at least a third of Dutch people and a majority of Americans claim to celebrate Valentine's in some way or other[1,2], resulting in a welcome heart-shaped and chocolate-flavoured boost to both the economy in the form of Valentine's deals and sales[3], and to culture in the form of Valentine's episodes, special editions and of course themed parties and borrels. Though, unfortunately it seems the lovely saint's name day isn't able to put a dent in the downward trend of fulfilling relationships.

Marriage, cohabitation and dating rates are all declining across Western countries[4,5]. For marriage rates this is quite understandable and desirable even, as it is largely due to people no longer ascribing too much importance to the institution of matrimony and there no longer being (such) a stigma on divorce. For the other rates however, the picture is bleaker as a majority of people still report to seek a committed relationship, but evidently are succeeding less[6]. This, like all that's bad of course, is heavily contributed to by neoliberal economics (e.g. you might not have time to date because you're working six days a week, or you can't live with your partner because there are no affordable homes), but it is also greatly hampered by the fundamentally false view we have of human relationships.

For the longest time it was thought that people in the wild (i.e. prehistoric humans) resembled chimpanzees in their behaviour and social structures. This isn't too far-fetched as chimpanzees are genetically very closely related to humans and their social behaviour is a perfect representation of the Hobbesian view of life in the state of nature being 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' [7]. For the realm of relationships this meant that, like chimps, if left

to our own devices we would devolve into a free-for-all with males brutally competing over access to females, who are powerless and passive participants in this ordeal (cue the mental image of a caveman bonking a cavewoman over the head and dragging her to his cave). Luckily though, under a strong state (a.k.a. Leviathan) we can inhibit our primal urges and live happily ever after in nuclear families headed by a man and completed by his wife and children (cue the mental image of the Flintstones family). Superficially looking at history, biology and current society, this view seems plausible enough, though it has one glaring shortcoming: the fact that it is wholly based on conjecture.

The aforescribed view has readily observable foundational cracks in the form of the already mentioned downward relationship trends which are compounded by the fact that people very often had (and still have) to be forced into nuclear families, and also, more anecdotally, the negative subliminal messaging surrounding marriage coming from married people themselves ("What are the three rings of marriage?"). Some further chiselling away at this theoretical base can be done by pointing at the fact that all truly monogamous animals, like for example swans, exhibit entirely different behaviour patterns, social structures and physiological characteristics than humans[8]. But the argument that definitively smashes the chimpanzee view of human relationships however, is the fact that chimps aren't our (only) closest cousins: there's also bonobos.

Bonobos are primates visually identical to chimpanzees and they are genetically equally closely related to humans as chimps are[9]. When first discovered they were mistaken to be a subspecies of chimps, earning them the name pygmy chimpanzees (as they're a bit smaller in stature). In the seventies, extensive research on bonobos was finally conducted - it took so long because their habitat is limited to an inhospitable part of a politically unstable country (DR Congo) - and it quickly became clear they were no pygmy chimps after all. What sets bonobos apart from chimpanzees, besides DNA and size, is their social behaviour. Unlike Hobbesian chimpanzees, bonobos seem to live up to Rousseau's ideal of the noble savage, or in their case rather the horny savage. Bonobos live in groups of a couple dozen

members and collectively care for the young and hunt for food. Sexual relationships, like with chimps, are a free-for-all, but there are key differences: firstly, female bonobos also take incentive; secondly, there are no resorts to violence; thirdly, sex is used non-reproductively (e.g. for bonding or simple pleasure); and there's also plenty of homosexual action. And unlike those dogged chimps, bonobos are together with humans the only animals to use the missionary position. These facts combined with your own experience living as a human should be plenty to infer that bonobos are much more apt to stand in as our state of nature doppelgangers than chimps are, but it should be clarified that we can't assume humans are promiscuous bisexuals just because our primate cousins, bonobos, are. This reasoning would be as weak as the reasoning behind the view that humans were violent serial monogamists just because our once purportedly closest cousins, chimps, are. Luckily, since the latter half of the 20th century the field of paleoanthropology, which researches how prehistoric humans lived by using comparative data from archaeology, primatology and anthropology, has made great headway in understanding what our relationships are like in the wild. And this ties in neatly with the primate-cousin narrative. The reasons why the physically identical chimpanzees and bonobos differ so much in the social sphere is an interesting one, that also explains why humans strayed from bonobo-like loving to chimp-ass monogamy, namely: private property. When bonobos hunt or gather, the loot (or booty, if you will) is shared evenly with all group members regardless of their social status or the effort they put into helping collect the meal. Conversely, when chimps hunt they seem to try to game the stag hunt dilemma, by shortly cooperating to catch prey but with the individual who actually snatches the hapless victim immediately defecting and trying to keep it all to themselves[10]. Now, human hunter-gatherers, like our bonobo cousins, are veritable communists and live up to the 'each according to their ability, to each according to their needs' ideal. You shouldn't be surprised then that paleoanthropological and regular anthropological comparative research (comparing contemporary hunter-gatherers from distinct locales, e.g. the Amazon, the

Congo basin and New Guinea) has found that hunter-gatherer relationships can be firmly classified on the B-side of the Bonobo-Chimpanzee spectrum. The thing is that this arrangement fundamentally changes the moment when hunter-gatherer tribes graduate into agriculturalism, which is where private property comes in.

When you live in a small community (e.g. hunter-gatherer tribe or bonobo band) where everything is shared, there are no parental disadvantages to polyamory, as it doesn't matter that much for men to know exactly who their children are (it doesn't matter for women either, but it would be strange if they didn't know), as all children receive equal treatment and are raised by all adults collectively. In fact in some tribes it has been observed that women seek to partner with as many men as possible during pregnancy, as to ensure they are all committed to raising the expected child[11]. In (post-)agricultural society however, such things as farms, plots of land and cattle exist and by proxy concepts like ownership, inheritance and theft. In this situation it suddenly becomes very important to males to know who their offspring is, as their lifetime of toiling the land, creating and collecting property, could have been all for naught if the 'wrong' person inherits it. As biology has made it such that women do know their offspring, the way for men to know theirs (pre-DNA testing times) is by severely limiting women's access to sex; preferably to one partner per lifetime. The successful implementation of this paternity test subversion scheme has led to the creation of the nuclear family and has been crucial in the transition from small tribes to vast civilizations, but it is entirely unnatural. Now, there are myriad customs about modern society that are unnatural of course, from bad like the forty-hour work week to good like modern medicine, but the move to monogamy can rightfully be classed among the most heinous activities we have concocted outside of the state of nature due to its immense side effects. The big and obvious ones are feudalism, capitalism and sexism, but the effects relevant to this article are the emergent properties that flowed from sexist monogamy. By reducing the once emancipated hunter-gatherer woman to a literal second-rate citizen good for baring and

caring for children only, many new phenomena like jealousy, slutshaming, homophobia, the idea that sex should only serve for reproduction, the idea that women have less sexual desire than men, and the ascribing of great significance to (losing one's) virginity, emerged. These concepts are all foreign to hunter-gatherer societies and should be rightfully seen as absurd and harmful in modern societies where women are on the way to being fully emancipated again and where parentage can be verified using DNA tests anyway. Unfortunately, millenia of living like monogamous sexists has given rise to extremely powerful cultural control mechanisms reinforcing this view.

As most major religions emerged in Bronze Age societies where there was a 'need' for sexist monogamy, they have been heavily imbued with ideas that solidify this view and hence people nowadays who don't live in Bronze Age societies still adhere to Bronze Age relational views because of their religion. And unfortunately due to religion's role in shaping society, most atheists do as well. Even if you grow up completely secularly you are still extremely likely to have a pair of parents consisting of one man and one woman and starting from the time you're able to comprehend the world around you you are bombarded with media and culture where romantic relations are exclusively formed between two people ("and they lived happily ever after"). Not even mentioning the immense financial benefits of being fiscally partnered with (one/an)other person. These cultural control mechanisms inadvertently give rise to such ideas as promiscuous women being viewed as 'easy' or of low worth and of polyamory, homosexuality and asexuality being at least rather strange, at most dangerous and, ironically enough, 'unnatural'. Though these wrongfully perceived as unnatural phenomena might in pre-industrial agricultural societies have been threatening for men who had the sole goal of having their own offspring inherit their hard-earned private property, this thinking is dangerously and unnecessarily anachronistic in our current day and age.

Culture is complex and ever-developing however, and besides the 'stick' reinforcers of nuclear family style monogamy like religious sins and cultural norms, there are also the

'carrots'. Which finally brings us back to Saint Valentine. Romance, courtship and loyalty to a partner are also entirely unknown to hunter-gatherers, since they – though not as promiscuous as bonobos – do take a more hedonistic approach to love. Yet, unlike the negative consequences stemming from the Neolithic Revolution (when humans turned from hunting-gathering to farming), there's no need to rid ourselves of these benign rituals and practices from the same source. Romantic gestures such as a thoughtful present or a candlelight dinner, or even simply not cheating on your partner, are harmless and effect genuine happiness. Furthermore, in relationships with only one partner people can form much stronger and intimate bonds than are possible in multi-partner arrangements, unlocking new levels of intimacy that were wholly inaccessible to our hunting and gathering forebears.

The gist ultimately is this: people aren't monogamous like chimpanzees but polyamorous (and bisexual, but that's another article) like bonobos. Sexist monogamy only appeared with the dawn of agriculture and private property, and brought with it a host of harmful emergent effects. All the agony of divorce, cheating, jealousy, slutshaming, along with the evils of discrimination against non heterosexually monogamous people (plus the risks of letting children be raised by only two adults, but that's yet another article) are unnatural, unhealthy and unnecessary since modern science has not only rendered the original causes for monogamy irrelevant through DNA-testing but through paleoanthropological research also enabled us to acquire the insights into what kinds of relationships we actually need to thrive. We must therefore rid ourselves of sexist monogamy statim. However, as all modern societies are still intimately wedded to the ideal of relationships looking like love between two people, haphazardly moving back to a society where polyamory is the norm would be as unfeasible as it is undesirable. What is much more realistic, and in the short-run much more satisfying to boot, would be to stay with monogamy as the default mode of relationships, but to spread awareness of its artificiality while we swiftly rid ourselves of the negative side-effects attached to it, accentuate

the positive aspects and gradually move towards a socialisation-free society.

As an ending note I'll add that I personally couldn't even properly indulge in polyamory if I wanted to. Life in monogamous capitalist society has also profoundly socialised me to view and experience romantic love as something done as a couple. In fact, I actually happen to be a giant sucker for romance and this Valentine's day, as well as countless other days, I will treat my (singular) partner to a sweet, borderline saccharine, romantic gesture; and I'll thoroughly enjoy it. Even though I – as should be clear by now – don't believe homo sapiens is a monogamous animal. I still think it crucial to work towards the widespread recognition of our innate polyamorousness, because even if, like me, you don't aspire to quadruple (or say, sextuple) your number of lovers, it is still immensely advantageous to be cognisant of the fact that monogamy isn't natural. In accordance with the trends highlighted at the start of this article and a vast reservoir of anecdotal evidence, monogamous relationships require great effort to succeed. Fretting when such a relationship doesn't seamlessly work out or succumbing to jealousy when you see your partner expresses interest in a third person will only lead to emotional exhaustion. Being aware of this will make your relationship all the more robust and fulfilling and is in this long stretch between polyamorous eras arguably the very best thing you can do for your love life.

Thus, even though some will claim that Valentine's is a commercialised sham-holiday to make you splurge on unneeded flowers and chocolate, I'll say that monogamy as a whole is a sham (or at least a social construct) and that to uphold and properly enjoy the charade great effort (e.g. in the form of romantic gestures) is needed, for which days like these lent the perfect opportunity. So to conclude: please do take your (prospected) partner on a romantic date this Valentine's Day, but also try to remember where we came from before you get into any monkey business.

Sources

0. Ryan, C., & Cacilda Jethá. (2011). *Sex at dawn : how we mate, why we stray, and what it means for modern relationships*. Harper.
00. Frans De Waal. (2006). *Our inner ape : a leading primatologist explains why we are who we are*. Riverhead Books.
1. DPG Media Privacy Gate. (n.d.). Myprivacy.dpgmedia.nl. <https://www.ad.nl/geld/valentijnsdag-we-vinden-het-commerciele-onzin-maar-doen-er-stiekem-massaal-aan-mee~a85a723f/>
2. Levene, K. (2022, February 2). Valentine's Day statistics: How much do Americans spend? Alliant Credit Union. <https://www.alliantcreditunion.org/money-mentor/valentines-day-statistics-how-much-do-americans-spend>
3. Kohan, S. E. (n.d.). Valentine's Day Spending Is Expected To Hit \$26 Billion, One Of The Highest On Record. *Forbes*. Retrieved February 10, 2024, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shelleykohan/2023/02/03/cupid-is-not-fretting-over-higher-prices-for-valentines-day/?sh=11fb2db109f0>
4. Bonos, L., & Guskin, E. (2019, March 21). It's not just you: New data shows more than half of young people in America don't have a romantic partner. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/03/21/its-not-just-you-new-data-shows-more-than-half-young-people-america-do-nt-have-romantic-partner/>
5. Marriage and divorce statistics. (n.d.). *Ec.europa.eu*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics#Fewer_marriages.2C_fewer_divorces
6. Singles Are Starting to Care Less About Looks. Here's What They Want Instead. (n.d.). *Time*. <https://time.com/6115383/match-singles-in-america-study-2021/>
7. Hobbled by Hobbes. How Chimpanzees Became Nasty, Brutish And Short. (2015). *Thisviewoflife.com*. <https://thisviewoflife.com/hobbled-by-hobbes-how-chimpanzees-became-nasty-brutish-and-short/>
- 8.
9. Some Generous Apes May Help Explain The Evolution Of Human Kindness. (2021, March 20). *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/03/20/978868116/some-generous-apes-may-help-explain-the-evolution-of-human-kindness#:~:text=Bonobos%20look%20like%20smallish%20chimpanzees>
10. Kleiman, D (1977). "Monogamy in Mammals" (PDF). *Quarterly Review of Biology*. 52 (1): 39–69. doi:10.1086/409721. PMID 857268. S2CID 25675086.
10. alnorwo1. (2015, November 18). Chimps on the hunt. *Ask an Anthropologist*. <https://askananthropologist.asu.edu/chimps-hunt>
11. Amazon tribes believe a child can have more than one father. (1999, January 24). *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/amazon-tribes-believe-a-child-can-have-more-than-one-father-1075873.html>