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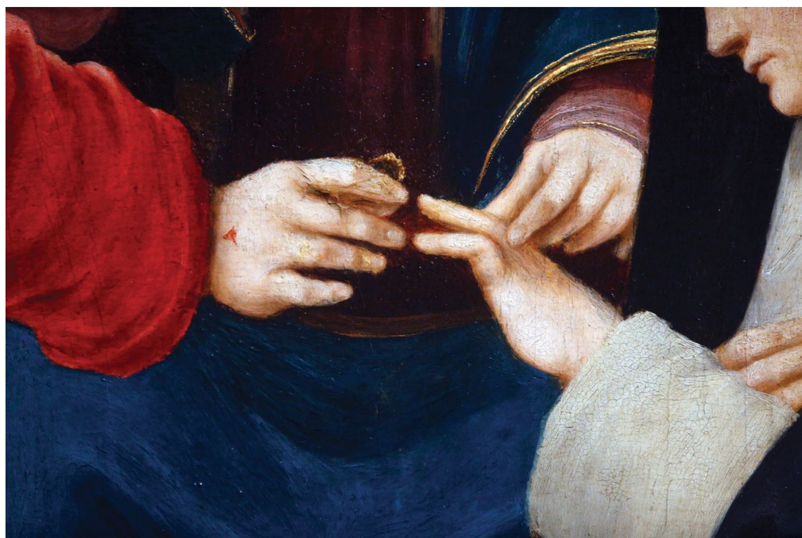
BOOKSHELF

'The WEIRDest People in the World' Review: Marriage Story

An evolutionary biologist argues that a change in how we coupled made the modern West radically different.



Detail from 'The Mystic Wedding of Santa Caterina da Siena.' (ca. 1517) by Bartolomeo Ramenghi.
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By Christopher Levenick
Oct. 2, 2020 7:21 pm ET

We may think that the culture of a society or civilization grows out of a variety of forces—social, political, historical, even biological. But what if culture is itself a potent force, one that, in part, shapes the others? "Culture," Joseph Henrich writes, "can and does alter our brains, hormones, and anatomy, along with our perceptions, motivations, personalities, [and] emotions." He assumes, for instance, a high degree of literacy in his readers and thus confidently describes certain features of their brains: e.g., slight abnormalities in the left ventral occipito-temporal region, part of a structure that favors verbal memory and analytic processing skills. Compared with most people around the world and throughout human history, he notes, these attributes are exceedingly rare.

High-level literacy is one of a cluster of traits that are the object of Mr. Henrich’s attention and analysis in “The WEIRDest People in the World,” a fascinating exploration of how we’ve come to be as we are. The title’s unorthodox appearance derives from the acronym embedded in it. In the academic literature, societies that trace their origins to Western Europe are referred to as “Weird”: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic.

THE WEIRDEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

By Joseph Henrich
FSG, 680 pages, $35

Drawing on his own research and the work of other social psychologists, Mr. Henrich, a professor of human evolutionary biology at Harvard University, asserts that Weird people, taken as a whole, share psychological traits that are not commonly found elsewhere. Such people are highly individualistic, nonconformist and analytical. They prefer abstract moral principles, universally applied, and are as affected by guilt as by shame. They are unusually trusting of strangers and, when it comes to making moral judgments, place a heightened emphasis on intentionality. These characteristics may strike us as unremarkable, but in the eyes of the rest of the world, Weird people are truly . . . weird.

When and how did these traits develop? And why in Western Europe? Here Mr. Henrich offers a novel hypothesis. In his telling, the qualities that make up Weird-ness did not—as many historians and commentators would claim—grow out of the creative energies of the Renaissance or the heightened individualism of the Reformation or the powerful analytic tools of the Enlightenment. All of these, Mr. Henrich argues, were downstream effects.

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PREVIEW

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The real cause of Weird-ness, he says, was the Roman Catholic Church—specifically, its policies regarding marriage. In the fourth century, Catholic leaders began proscribing a number of traditional marriage practices. Cousin marriages, polygynous unions and marriages between step-family members were prohibited. To be sure, it took decades, sometimes centuries, to eradicate what had formerly been common arrangements. In time, however, the restrictions extended to marriages between distant blood relatives. By the 11th century, sixth cousins—who might share one or more of their 128 great-great-great-great-great-grandparents—were forbidden to marry. Penalties were often severe, including excommunication, property confiscation and exile.

These emerging marital practices were unlike anything else on earth. And they were a curious development, Mr. Henrich observes, in tension with more than one marriage depicted in the Bible and not obviously connected to other Christian doctrinal commitments. But he isn't particularly interested in why the Catholic marital doctrine emerged. The church was "lucky," he writes, and "bumbled" into it.

What interests Mr. Henrich is the effects of the doctrine, which profoundly reshaped family life. Like people around the world, pre-Christian Europeans lived in extended family networks related to larger kin-based institutions (such as tribes or clans). Catholic marital practices dissolved such traditional family structures. Marriage became strictly monogamous, consensually entered into by individuals with no familial relationship. Newly married couples were expected to separate from their parents and establish their own households, in which domestic life centered on the nuclear family.

With the decline of intense kin networks, medieval Europeans, Mr. Henrich says, "became increasingly free to move, both relationally and residentially." They were at liberty to choose their spouses, friends and business partners. They could join a growing number of

voluntary associations: guilds, universities, monastic and mendicant orders. Over generations, these individualistic tendencies consolidated, resulting in the emergence of Weird psychology and the traits that make it so distinctive. In turn, Weird psychology generated the explosive energies that would animate the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment—and all that followed.

To be sure, Mr. Henrich would insist that his thesis says nothing about the truth or falsity of Catholic doctrine. He also sees nothing inherently better or worse about Weird-ness, suggesting instead that global psychological diversity should be celebrated. And he emphasizes that Weird-ness is not a permanent condition. Minds and cultures will continue to evolve, changing us in ways we can't predict.

"The WEIRDest People in the World" is an example of "big history" at its best. It draws on a wide variety of data—including creative empirical research (e.g., studies of which United Nations delegations were most likely to pay New York parking tickets despite having diplomatic immunity)—to posit a provocative explanation for major historical developments. It also takes an interdisciplinary approach to its subject, making use of evolutionary studies in culture, religion and psychology. And Mr. Henrich's writing is admirably clear. It is worth pointing out that his thesis, first advanced in an academic journal two years ago and updated since, is still being vetted by the scientific community. One can't help thinking that Mr. Henrich will welcome any challenges that may arise from his—surely highly literate—readership.

—Mr. Levenick is the director of public engagement at the John Templeton Foundation.

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GREG NEWBOLD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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