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# Fueling Value Change

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*Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve*  
Ian Morris  
Princeton University Press, 2015

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In *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*, Ian Morris argues that over the course of human history, changes in energy capture have driven changes in human values. He distinguishes three broad stages of societal development, correlating with three major modes of energy capture: foraging, farming, and use of fossil fuels. As societies capture more energy per capita, Morris argues, they become progressively less tolerant of interpersonal violence. And tolerance of various forms of hierarchy (economic, political, gender) tends, in varying degrees, to increase as foraging gives way to farming and then to decline in a fossil fuel regime. To explain these changes, he offers a theory of social evolution, positing that certain values make the societies that embrace them “fitter” than others and more likely to survive and prosper in each of the three energy regimes.

For example, economic and political hierarchy could hardly take root in a foraging regime where a mobile lifestyle places limits on the accumulation of possessions, and where put-upon band members can simply leave and set up camp elsewhere. To take advantage of the concentrated energy in domesticated plants, on the other hand, farming societies have to stay put, and to do it most efficiently, they require a division of labor, which makes them ripe for hierarchy. The most economically and militarily successful farming societies will be those that embrace values reinforcing hierarchy and large-scale coordination. The vast energy potential unleashed by fossil

fuels in the modern era, in turn, makes possible a new economic and social dynamism and gives a competitive edge to those societies that eschew hierarchy and value individual initiative.

## Values and Social Organization

“Philosophical history”—explaining macro-patterns in human history—is a hazardous enterprise. Indeed, the gross inadequacy of well-known attempts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has given the enterprise a bad reputation. Morris does an excellent job of rehabilitating the genre, arguing that as anthropological and historical science improves, so does the quality of the explanations and predictions philosophical history can offer. His own contribution is a compelling synthesis backed up by an impressive wealth of source material.

It is not, however, without limitations. One notable example is the omission of pastoralist societies. Morris acknowledges this omission and downplays its significance, but the fact is that pastoralist societies and their own characteristic set of values, which include toughness, loyalty, a code of honor, and often belligerence, had a major impact on the development of Eurasian civilization. Warrior-pastoralists grafted themselves onto farming societies as ruling classes in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India, Persia, and elsewhere. Even where they were driven out by native ruling classes (as in Egypt and China), they left their stamp on native institutions. Partly in consequence of this, the values of farming societies were typically not, as Morris tacitly assumes, uniform or unitary. Farming societies frequently had at least two layers, one of which (the warrior or ruling class) was far more enthusiastic about political hierarchy and prone to violence than the other (the farmers themselves).

Morris also trips over the issue of slavery, arguing that the institution was “functionally necessary” in farming societies. In fact, slavery was neither necessary nor universally practiced. Morris tries to explain slavery in terms of low marginal returns on agricultural labor, but low marginal returns would suggest employing fewer hands, not more. Slavery simply cannot be explained in purely economic terms: it is essentially a power relationship, institutionalized.

While Morris has done pioneering work quantifying energy capture in historical and anthropological context, in *Foragers*, he places too much weight on its explanatory power. Quantity of energy consumed per capita matters, but so, too, do quality—for example, how

dense and easily transportable a fuel is—and distribution, the question of how easy it is for individuals to access their per capita share. Furthermore, the relationship between energy and values is not direct, but is instead mediated by the form of social organization. Indeed, social organization is a much better place than energy capture to focus our attention, as the example of maritime city-states shows.

Morris expounds at length on the place of maritime city-states in his system as farming age societies that “prove the rule” as exceptions to it. These societies draw extra “organic” energy through trade, allowing them to manifest, in advance, the modern values prevalent in the fossil fuel age. How that surplus energy—the Egyptian potash in Athens, the oriental spices in Venice, the North Atlantic cod in London—translates into proto-modern egalitarian values is left unexplained. A plausible explanation that does not appeal to energy capture at all is that a society organized on mercantile lines provides (under satisfactory economic conditions) wide scope for individual initiative and ambition, permits social mobility, encourages free thinking, and demands law and order accountable to the citizenry. A mercantile society, then, would have much more in common, in terms of values, with an industrial society than it would with a feudal farming society, regardless of the quantities of energy captured. In projecting the influences of material conditions on values in the twenty-first century, therefore, we should look not to energy capture per se, but to social and economic organization.

## Emergence and Dynamism

Morris satisfactorily demonstrates that social evolution can select values that are “fittest” in a given natural, technological, or political environment, but he does not adequately explain how a diversity of values arises in the first place (the equivalent of random mutations in biological evolution). For example, how do hierarchical values emerge in a social environment that favors egalitarianism, and vice versa? It would appear that there are certain values that can be counted on to recur spontaneously, regardless of social environment, because they are part of our evolutionary heritage. These include two that are at odds with each other: the will to power and the countervailing tendency that anthropologists have dubbed “counter-dominance.” The ridicule with which elders and womenfolk put arrogant young hunters in their place, the

eruption of egalitarian Axial religions and their eventual cooptation by power elites, the recurrent peasant wars, the Enlightenment critique of absolutism, the modern imperial projects and wars of independence—the same essential drama repeats. We can reasonably expect both of these opposing drives to be with us in any future scenario.

Furthermore, although Morris downplays it, there can be little doubt that values play an active role in history. The dynamism of Athens in relation to neighboring Greek city-states can be attributed at least in part to its relative egalitarianism. The egalitarian spirit of the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment not only prefigured the values that would be “fit” in the modern industrial world, but also actively hastened the development of those material conditions. Twenty-first-century projections must recognize this dynamic relationship and avoid falling back on a simple base-superstructure model, in which values “emerge” from material conditions and contribute nothing.

## Values That Endure

Morris’s selection of values was not arbitrary. The study of violence and hierarchy serves a didactic purpose, i.e., to emphasize discontinuities between eras. However, Morris carries this emphasis on discontinuities to extremes, resulting in an uncomfortable moral relativism. He suggests that the Taliban’s repressive values are “wrong” only to the extent that they are out-of-date, and argues that a Rawlsian conception of justice would support egalitarianism in a fossil-fuel-based society but hierarchy in a farming society.<sup>1</sup> In making the latter argument, he conflates two questions: what kind of society is suited to win at the game of social evolution and what kind of society one would wish to belong to. Certainly, a society organized like ancient Rome is favored to persist for centuries, but that is little consolation to the slave. If one must live in a farming society, one might legitimately prefer to live among the egalitarian Essenes.

Morris acknowledges that other values also merit exploration. Attention to core values such as *security* and *autonomy* (both unaddressed by Morris) can help us see an essential unity underlying the diversity of human history. Foragers frequently succeed in achieving (within

environmental limits) a fair degree of both autonomy and security. Risk-averse farmers willingly compromise autonomy for the sake of security (in the form of the harvest that their energies are directed toward procuring, and the protection of the local lord), while the risk-seeking aristocrat values autonomy over security. Under mercantilism, and then fossil-fuel-driven industrialism and post-industrialism, new avenues have opened up by which ever-wider classes of individuals have been better enabled to pursue their own autonomous ends within the shell of security provided by the state. Regardless of what form twenty-first-century society takes, core values such as autonomy and security will likely persist.

## Possible Futures

Morris offers two possible visions of the future. One is a “post-human” techno-utopia—or dystopia, depending on the reader’s sensibility—fueled by continued exponential growth in per capita energy usage, an unrealistic assumption that renders this scenario too implausible to be seriously considered. The other alternative is a “collapse” scenario in which energy usage plummets and civilization reverts to value systems from past ages.

Must we resign ourselves to such fatalism? No, for Morris’s range of future energy scenarios is far from complete. As fossil fuels go offline, other sources (e.g., nuclear and renewables) could be brought online at scale. Rather than plummeting, energy usage per capita could flatline, settle at a lower level than today, or dip and then rise again.

A transition from fossil fuels will not necessarily mean a loss of what Morris considers the “fossil fuel” value regime. In a world powered by nuclear power or renewables, the form of social organization and the associated value regime could remain recognizably “modern.” As in fossil fuel societies and the mercantile societies that preceded them, the state could continue to provide the physical and economic security individuals require to pursue self-defined life goals, and relatively low tolerance of hierarchy and violence could continue (or even deepen).

In such an extended modern age, there will still be scope for variation and variability in values. Energy capture (including the quality and distribution of energy) will continue to influence values by shaping social organization. Nuclear power, for example, would enhance the role of the technocratic state; distributed generation of renewables could promote a more decentralized

social order. Further, values will continue to be contested in ways that shape history. Two very different visions of politics and culture compete for dominance in the United States, for example, while today's Europe faces a crisis of solidarity. The Middle East has become a battleground for the competing value regimes of Islamism, nationalism, and liberalism. The challenge of climate change will test the global community's collective altruism and perseverance. The outcomes of these value-laden contests are very much within our hands as political actors; they are by no means predetermined by energy capture or any other material factor. What is constant in human nature—e.g., recurring tendencies to dominance and counter-dominance—places some bounds on possible variation in value regimes. Extreme hierarchy will engender rebellion, and it may be equally difficult to sustain extreme egalitarianism. But within these wide bounds there is much room for the free play of values and the possibility of deliberately shaping a better society in an extended modern era.

## Endnotes

1. A Rawlsian concept of justice requires a social order to be satisfactory to a hypothetical observer who does not know in advance what role he or she will be assigned in it.

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## About the Author



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## About the Publication

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