

Epicurean Views On Hierarchy In Social Structures

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 16, 2024 at 5:47 AM

A healthy degree of conformism is necessary if you want to be socially successful and institutionally reproduce yourself. An ancient philosophical school was a true institution, not an ad hoc gathering of folks to talk. Because they were institutions they could survive for many centuries if left alone. It was Justinian, an emperor with a near theocratic mentality, that forced the surviving Athenian schools to shut down.

Before Epicurus there were hedonist schools that prized non-conformism. Despite having some very brilliant and interesting people engaged in them, they didn't attract a lot of followers and faded quickly from view. That's because the prospect of social success places hard limits on what you are allowed to say and how you are allowed to say it. Although some things had changed in Epicurus' time, an Athenian citizen who didn't participate in the state religion and all its festivals and sacrificial rites was, simply put, an abomination. Promulgating in your school that all things people believe about the nature of the gods are completely false and then participating in popular religious rites carries a certain degree of hypocrisy. This hypocrisy didn't go unnoticed by the creed's enemies but it was a necessary adaptation.

If Epicureanism is best adapted to a highly particular social setting (decentralized non-hierarchy or whatever) or best reserved only for the good times (and the times were very bad in 1st century BCE Italy when according to Cicero Epicureanism was popular) then it can't fulfill its claim to provide eudaimonia to all its followers.

The ancient Epicureans of all centuries never made any serious effort to affect political change or made any sort of exhortation about how people should best govern themselves because they simply didn't care. The fact that some Epicureans fought in the Roman civil war or other conflicts means that the personal fortunes of those people hinged on political status which forced them to participate. But even if you don't stand to gain anything from participating in wars it is prudent to do so because of the huge social pressures to conform. Conforming even to regimes you despise is actually wise as many young impulsive people like Sophie Scholl or those in today's Russia find out the hard way.

Ancient Epicureanism is not a political philosophy and as far as we can tell Epicurus doesn't seem to have written a single major work about government, politics and the like. The Epicureans also never mounted a serious polemic effort against Christianity because by the time Christianity was ascendant Epicureanism was not even on the radar as a competitor anymore.

You said that hunter-gatherers have hierarchy. That's not accurate. Immediate-return hunter gatherers (meaning people who subsist entirely on wild foods they they consume soon after

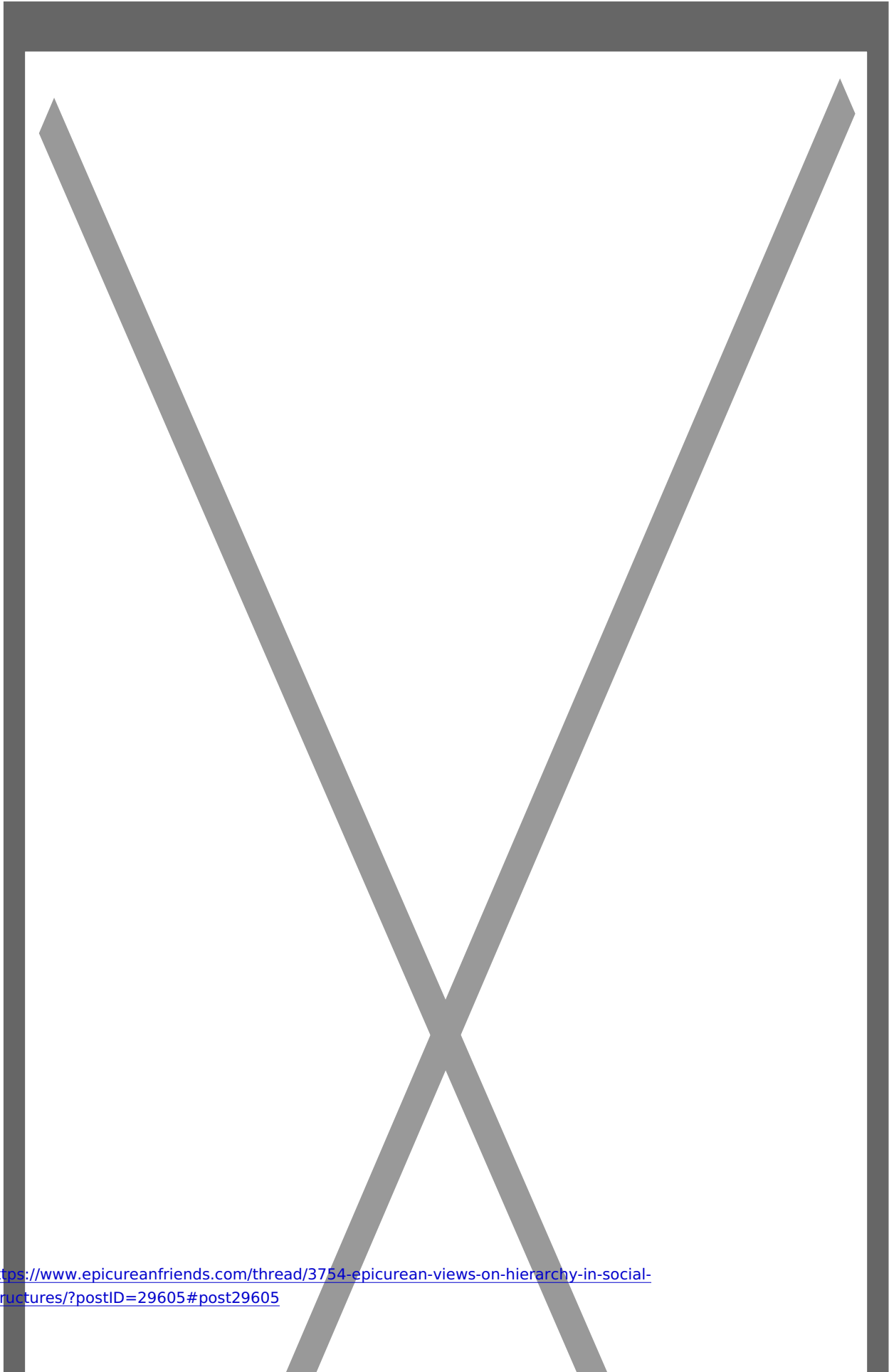
catching and who do not cultivate any plants or keep any livestock and possess nothing that they can't carry with them) have some status differences as all primates have but these don't translate in anything we would recognize as hierarchy and systematic coercion. Leaders in those societies are just people whose opinion on some matters is valued more because they have convinced others that they are wise. They are not some authority figure who says 'jump!' and you must jump or else and he isn't someone who is entitled to more food, and entertainment than you. In fact 'leaders' are expected to outperform others in pro-social gestures.

Only under the conditions of agricultural surpluses does our natural propensity to assign status tend to express itself as a hierarchical pyramid. Similarly, climate change manifests itself by producing more drought in some places and more snow and rain in others. Same underlying cause, different effects.

People in remote tropical regions of the world with dark skin and scant or crude garments that grow yams and bananas and keep domestic pigs and chickens but sometimes also hunt and gather are not hunter-gatherers. The right word to call them is peasants. My grandparents hunted and gathered everything that was in season and my great-grandparents almost never used money. But they were simply peasants. If they had dark skin and lived in Australia or the Amazon they could have been called 'hunter-gatherers'.

Steven Pinker does exactly that. He considers some peasant groups in the tropics who are as poor or poorer than my great-grandparents and who occasionally engage in vendetta-like squabbles very typical of peasant communities to be the same thing as prehistoric hunter-gatherers and uses this to prove that our pre-historic ancestors lived in a Hobbesian nightmare. He also apparently considers the famous Ötzi mummy to have been a hunter-gatherer. But he was a neolithic farmer and ore smelter of Anatolian descent who for some reason got into a fight before being stalked up a mountain and taken out with an arrow.

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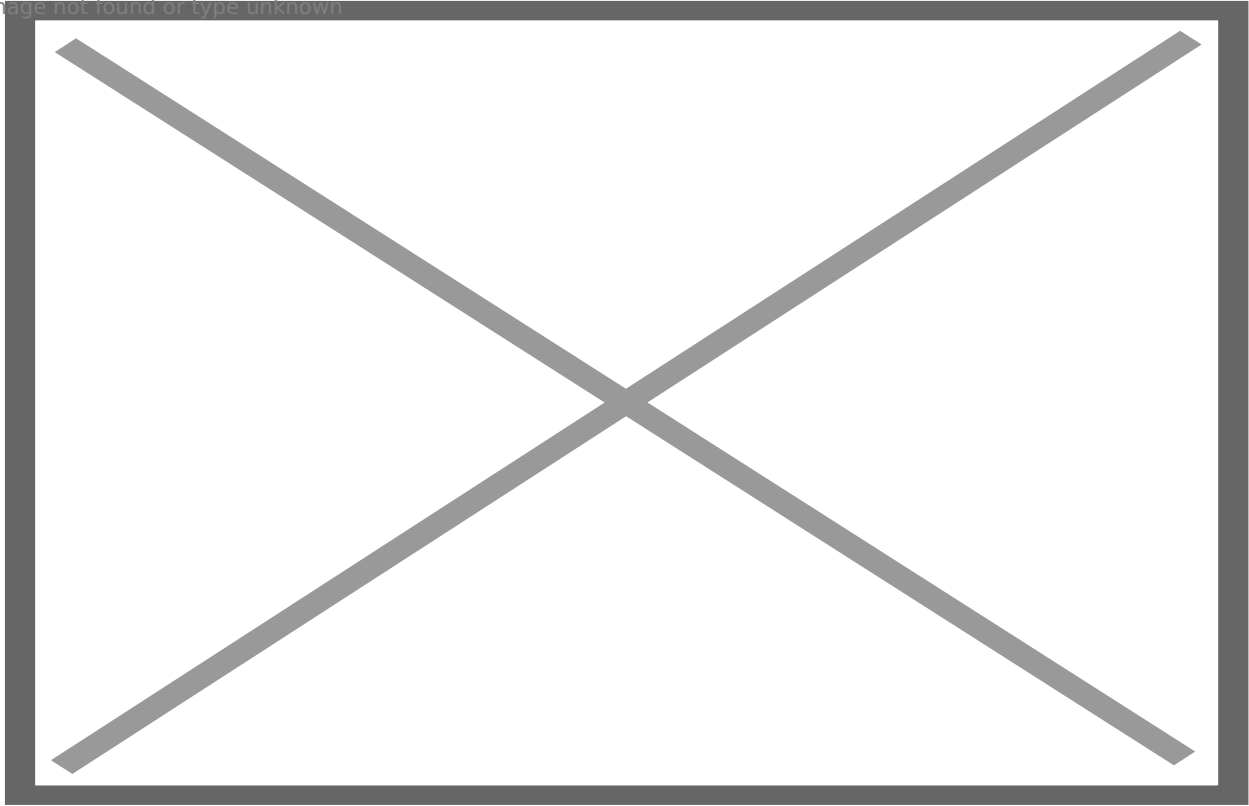
<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3754-epicurean-views-on-hierarchy-in-social-structures/?postID=29605#post29605>

[Steven Pinker's Stinker on the Origins of War](#)

Did Steven Pinker knowingly mislead his audience at TED?

www.psychologytoday.com

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[The Famous 'Iceman' Ötzi Is Not Who We Thought He Was](#)

A new and improved DNA analysis of the famous 'Iceman' mummy suggests this ancient individual is not who we thought he was.

www.sciencealert.com

I disagree with your view that colonial America or Switzerland are somehow relevant as examples of fair and just societies. And I disagree with your view that non-traditional ways to organize a small community are indefinitely viable within a civilized society. But anyway you might want to look at this book which traces such recorded experiments and presents them from a favorable perspective.

<https://www.amazon.com/Everyday-Utopia-Years-Experiments-Teach/dp/1982190213>

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