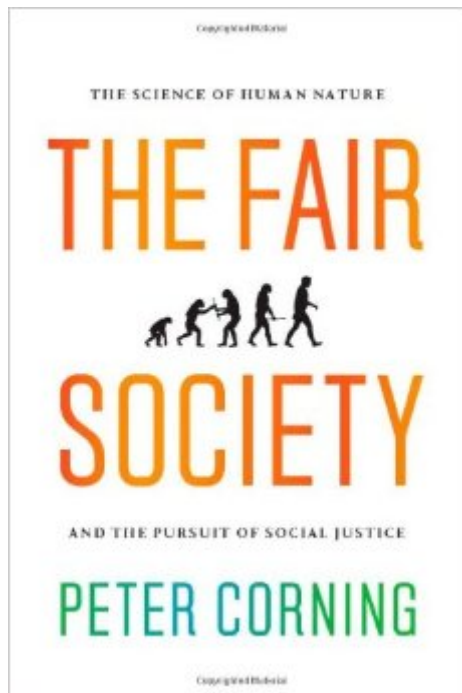


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The Fair Society: The Science Of Human Nature And The Pursuit Of Social Justice



Synopsis

We've been told, again and again, that life is unfair. But what if we're wrong simply to resign ourselves to this situation? What if we have the power—and more, the duty—to change society for the better? We do. And our very nature inclines us to do so. That's the provocative argument Peter Corning makes in *The Fair Society*. Drawing on the evidence from our evolutionary history and the emergent science of human nature, Corning shows that we have an innate sense of fairness. While these impulses can easily be subverted by greed and demagoguery, they can also be harnessed for good. Corning brings together the latest findings from the behavioral and biological sciences to help us understand how to move beyond the Madoffs and Enrons in our midst in order to lay the foundation for a new social contract—a Biosocial Contract built on a deep understanding of human nature and a commitment to fairness. He then proposes a sweeping set of economic and political reforms based on three principles of fairness—equality, equity, and reciprocity—that together could transform our society and our world. At this crisis point for capitalism, Corning reveals that the proper response to bank bailouts and financial chicanery isn't to get mad—it's to get fair.

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Customer Reviews

This is a powerful book. It answers the critical and timely question: what should replace the shambles of pure socialism and unfettered free market capitalism? So many books that fall into the same category are utopian and myopic rather than grounded/policy driven and thus fall short on

many counts. The Fair Society was obviously instructed by robust thinking on many aspects of human society and does not strive to attain some fixed and abstract ideal. Instead, Corning's ideal of fairness aims to mitigate the mundane suffering of the masses through social justice (rather than 'liberate' them). It focuses on improving what he calls the "collective survival enterprise," a kind of "we're all in this together" view of human society grounded in basic needs such as food and shelter. I agree this view is a more accurate reflection of the realities of highly interdependent post-modern societies than the "stay off my lawn" worldview of libertarianism, a favorite target throughout the book. The thing that impressed me most about the book, aside from the prolific citations and references, was Corning's thorough contemplation and rejection of both idealized capitalism and socialism: "Neither the rational, calculating, egoistic Homo economics nor the cooperative, caring, altruistic 'socialist man' can encompass the dualities and the diversity of human-kind. All the evidence suggests that a more nuanced and complex view of human nature is essential" (143). While the book treads ancient paths by looking for a political and economic philosophy to manage increasingly large and complex human communities by looking towards human nature, it treads new ground by rejecting this dichotomy (and thus the tired conclusions engendered by it).

This is a spectacular book, but the best aspect of this book is that Professor Corning begins his argument at exactly the right place: "We have been witnessing the emergence of a full-blown "science of human nature," a diverse effort involving many disciplines, including evolutionary biology, neurobiology, behavioral genetics, human ethology, several branches of psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology, political science, and even the study of animal behavior. This broad, multidisciplinary effort is providing us with new insights and new perspectives on some ancient questions, and (I will argue) definitive resolutions to some long-standing philosophical and ideological debates. In a nutshell, we are beginning to get a fix on the deep structure of human nature." Indeed, Corning goes on to call this new social contract a "biosocial contract" and, as he states, "To summarize this new vision very briefly, the ground-zero premise (so to speak) of the biological sciences is that survival and reproduction constitute the basic, continuing, inescapable problem for all living organisms: life is at bottom a "survival enterprise." (Darwin characterized it as the "struggle for existence.") Furthermore, the problem of survival and reproduction is multifaceted and relentless; it is a problem that can never be permanently solved. Thus an organized, interdependent society is quintessentially a "collective survival enterprise." To borrow a term from sociobiology, it's a "superorganism." This taproot assumption about the human condition is hardly news, but we very often deny it, or downgrade it, or simply lose touch with it." Despite coming in at

just under two-hundred pages, Professor Corning's book reads like a veritable who's who of the scientific and economic community.

Peter Corning is a distinguished evolutionary biologist who has spent much of his research life investigating the implications of evolutionary biology for human social life. This book is perhaps the most ambitious of his efforts, and draws on cutting research concerning evolution and human nature. Corning is very knowledgeable and his description and analysis of this research is highly informative. Corning is a man of the Left, and this book is his attempt to construct a realistic, morally and politically compelling, set of principles for a just society. Corning is concerned with constructing economics and social institutions that (a) speak to the needs of the poor and dispossessed in our society; (b) foster meritocratic reward, entrepreneurship, and innovation, and (c) are socially stable in the sense of attracting a strong majority of voters in a democratic society. The goal is indeed a worthy one, as achieving social justice is the only liberal ideal that remains unrealized in contemporary society. "A harmonious society," observes Corning, "depends, absolutely, on fairness and social justice." (p. 171) Corning's first principle of social justice is that "goods and services must be distributed to each of us according to our basic needs (in this there must be equality)." (p. 154) Corning devotes considerable space to defining "basic needs" and defending his definition against the many critics of the concept, based on the work of such experts as Amartya Sen, Ian Gough, Len Doyal, and many others. Corning's defense of basic needs is very persuasive. Moreover, it is clear that in an affluent society, it is very feasible to meet the basic needs of all citizens without much sacrifice on the part of the non-poor.

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