

INTRODUCTION

Democracy!

Whether you consider it “The worst form of government, except for all the others”, “The bludgeoning of the people, by the people, for the people”, or simply “The road to socialism” - one thing seems clear. Representative democracy has come to dominate the globe.

According to The Economist’s “Democracy Index”, 64.4% of the world’s adults can vote to elect their leaders. The magazine considers twenty-two nations to be “Full Democracies”. Another fifty-four are classified as “Flawed Democracies” - they do hold elections, but they have governance issues. And thirty-seven are dubbed “Hybrid Regimes” - their elections might not be free or fair. (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018)

Representative democracy reaches far and wide. But how deep, exactly, does it penetrate?

Is it enough to simply elect our leaders and sit back, helpless, as they rule over us like dictators? What good is selecting our politicians, if we cannot control our media, police or soldiers? If we must blindly follow our teachers’ and bosses’ commands, is it not a little naïve to believe that we are the masters of our own destinies? And if our resources are controlled by a tiny cabal of plutocrats, bankers and corporations; can we honestly say that our economies are being run for us?

Does representative democracy actually put power in the hands of the majority? Or could things be a little more, well, *democratic*?

It was not always like this. For hundreds-of-thousands of years, we humans lived in small bands, which tended to be far more democratic than modern society.

In the first section of this book, “A (Very) Brief History Of Democracy”, we will see how these groups mocked, criticised, disobeyed, ostracised, expelled, deserted, and even executed would-be-chiefs, thereby ensuring that power remained with the people. We shall see how those groups combined, to form democratic confederacies

- how democracy survived through the Middle Ages, on the commons, in the monasteries and guilds - and how mass movements forced the reforms that led to the rise of the representative democracies which dominate the globe today.

History, of course, is an ongoing process. In Section Two, we will see how our peers are democratising the political landscape *today*...

We shall take a peek at the types of direct democracy being practised in Rojava, Venezuela and Switzerland; before heading over to China, where “Deliberative Democracy”, a modern take on sortition, is beginning to gain some traction. And we shall return to Dundee, in Scotland, to introduce “Participatory Budgeting”, through which the locals are given a say in how their council’s budget is spent.

In Chapter Seven, we will introduce “Liquid Democracy” - a system that allows members of political parties, such as Spain’s Podemos, to propose and amend policies, vote on those proposals, and *delegate their votes* to like-minded souls. Finally, in Chapter Eight, we shall look at that last bastion of people power: The political protest.

For such tools to achieve their potential, we need a free press, to provide us with an abundance of good information, and an educated populace, with the ability to dissect fact from fiction. In Chapters Nine and Ten, we shall take a look at how this might be achieved...

We will visit Britain’s Summerhill School, America’s Sudbury Schools, and Brazil’s Lumiar Schools - democracies, where pupils can self-educate, set the rules and hold court. We shall chart the rise and fall of the people-powered “Indymedia”, its predecessor, public access television, and its democratic cousin, the member-owned paper.

Yet even with such institutions in place, democracy will remain a pipe-dream so long as policemen and soldiers serve the minority...

In Chapter Eleven, we will take a trip with George Orwell to meet the POUM - a democratic army, run by the people, for the people, without a goose-step or barked order in sight. And in Chapter Twelve, we shall look at a few ways through which we might democratise the police; considering the case for elected police chiefs, neighbourhood watches and citizen’s arrests.

That just leaves Part Four. It is the largest section of the book because it covers

a topic that affects us all on a daily basis: The economy.

Chapter Thirteen takes a look at workplace democracy, considering ideas such as collaborative hiring, profit-sharing, pre-approval, holacracy and worker cooperatives.

Chapter Fourteen tackles the thorny issue of corporatocracy; asking how we can make businesses produce the things *we* demand, rather than the things *they* wish to supply. We will take a look at the “Sharing Economy”, epitomised by Toronto’s Library of Things - consumer cooperatives, such as FC Barcelona - and advertising bans, like the one introduced in São Paulo.

In Chapter Fifteen, we will attempt to solve the “Plutocracy Problem”, through which rich consumers, with their extra *spending power*, can unduly influence the distribution of resources. We shall consider the cases for fiscal policy, a return to the commons, the zero marginal-cost society, and buying clubs.

We shall finish by taking a look at some of the ways through which we might democratise the supply of money: one-hundred percent reserve banking, sovereign money, public banks, peer-to-peer lending, community currencies and cryptocurrencies.

I hope this gives a flavour of things to come.

The book is jam-packed with many more topics than have been mentioned here. I have tried to make it as entertaining as it is informative. If you want a serious, academic tome, then this might not be the book for you! I am a novelist, after all. Although I would like to think that my degree in economics, from the London School of Economics (LSE), does qualify me to dabble in the social sciences.

These pages contain a raft of ideas and stories, but several others miss the cut. This is in part due to my own ignorance, and in part because the subject of “Democracy” is so gargantuan that even the greatest minds would struggle to do it justice.

Whilst writing “Democracy: A User’s Guide”, I often felt as though I had bitten off more than I could chew. Yet I still felt that it needed to be written.

My previous book, “Individutopia”, tackled one of the subjects we will discuss Part Four: The corporatocracy. In Individutopia, the main character seeks to free

herself from corporate control; going in search of the sort of earthy, small-scale democracies we shall meet in Chapter One.

Individutopia was well received by most readers, but a couple of one-star reviews did stand out. The first called it, “Insane leftist propaganda... (that) rang like a communist manifesto”. The other suggested we should accept corporate control because, “Over one-hundred-million people were murdered by communist and socialist regimes in the Twentieth Century alone”.

Such reviewers seem to believe that there are just two political systems: American-style capitalism and Russian-style communism. We should accept corporate control because the only alternative is so ghastly that its death-toll is nine digits long.

I wrote this book to lay such a belief to rest (and to add some substance to the topics covered somewhat more whimsically in my novels).

In reality, these two political ideologies *both* involve top-down control. The former gives power to corporations, banks, plutocrats, *and yes* to governments too. The latter gives all the power to the state.

I dislike both ideologies. I want to live in a world in which *no-one* rules us from the top-down. For me, this is the essence of “Democracy” - a system in which the power is held by all the people, or at least by the majority.

Perhaps this definition is different from your own. If it is, I hope you can bear with me!

Those two angry, I would say “Misinformed” reviewers, did have one thing correct. I suppose I do have a left-wing bias. Anyone who has read my novels or seen my tweets will confirm as much.

Born into a conservative family, and sent to private school (albeit for just four years); I never identified as a lefty until I jacked in the day job to become an author. I have always considered myself an anarchist, if the truth be told. Even before I knew the term existed, I was resisting the authority figures in my life - my parents and teachers.

This natural disdain for authority spread into my politics. I despised the authoritarian left *and* the authoritarian right - the likes of Stalin and Mao, *and* the

likes of Hitler and Franco.

Still, I do have a natural inclination towards the more libertarian left; a bias I have tried to temper wherever possible...

In the bibliography, you will find seven references from The Financial Times, three from The Daily Telegraph, and even one from the International Monetary Fund! These may be outnumbered by left-wing sources, but they do hold their own.

I have also included some ideas that might sit more comfortably with those on the right than those on the left...

In the chapter on policing, we will meet the elected sheriff doing everything he can to uphold his constituents' right to bear arms. The concept of 100% reserve banking was first developed by the Chicago School economists beloved by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. "The Zero Marginal Cost Society", which is offered as a solution to the plutocracy problem, assumes the ultimate efficiency of free markets. The chapter on workplace democracy gives credit to the likes of Google, Pret A Manger and Zappos. I may not be a fan of these large corporations myself, but I am more than willing to tip my hat to them when they empower their workers.

Even this may not be enough for some right-wingers. But that is life. As they say: "Haters gonna hate".

Anyway, that is enough of the preamble. Let's move on to the good stuff...

PART ONE

**A (VERY) BRIEF
HISTORY OF
DEMOCRACY**

1. PRIMITIVE DEMOCRACY

Two gorillas walk into an enclosure.

The first, Calabar, is an impressive chap. His sturdy frame and colossal thighs almost scream, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am the alpha here!”

The second, Rann, is no shrinking violet. Yet one cannot help but acknowledge his inferiority. His muscles are a fraction of the size of his companion’s. His claws and teeth are far less malign.

These two gorillas enter the enclosure as comrades. Having spent several weeks in the same cage, at the Yerkes Primate Centre in Atlanta, they are accustomed to each other’s presence.

Their alliance does not last long.

Met by the sight of four lady gorillas, each turns to the other with lust burning red in their eyes:

“This will be my kingdom. These mates will be mine!”

Calabar’s iron fists pound his chest.

The walls vibrate with mirth.

Rann’s leathery paws ricochet across his breasts. They create an echo. Audible, almost rhythmic, but nowhere near as loud as Calabar’s pounding beat.

Slowly, these apes begin to move; sidestepping in the dust, pitter-pattering in a delicate semi-circle which belies their hulking frames.

Torso aligns with torso. Eye fixes upon eye.

A tense pause. The calm before the storm.

Rann’s foot claws the earth. It seems as though he is about to make his move. Like a sprinter at the starting block, his muscles tense and his jaw juts forward.

But it is Calabar who charges first, swishing past Rann’s left shoulder. His hair bristles with static, and his claws slash through the soil.

And now Rann is on the move.

Like pinballs, they crash; rebounding off one wall, then another.

A dust cloud engulfs the scene.

The lady gorillas shuffle back. They would blend into the scenery, if it were not for their hoots and hollers, flaying arms and agitated feet.

Rann and Calabar zigzag across the enclosure, bouncing off the sides, swinging from rope to rope. They almost collide. Then Rann barges Calabar, who trips, stumbles, composes himself, and resumes the charade.

The first blow, a backhanded slap, knocks Rann to the ground. He springs back up. Visibly shaken, he considers fighting, but thinks better of it.

He retreats into the shadows.

The alpha has dispatched the beta, and a hierarchy has been established.

Or so it might seem...

This may have been the first fight, but it is not the last.

In similar duels, over the days which follow, Calabar's superior strength continues to prove irresistible. This hulking beast dispatches his weaker rival on a regular basis.

Yet Calabar fails to land a decisive blow. The skirmishes continue...

Swipe follows swipe. Blood trickles from gashes in leathery skin. And then, during the umpteenth confrontation, Rann's knee buckles. He stumbles, tries to regain his balance, and braces himself as Calabar's shadow engulfs his entire form.

Angling his face, Rann looks into the crevices which line Calabar's palm. His enemy looms high, ready to crush his weaker foe.

Calabar's arm jolts forward, beginning its descent, but it moves no further. Held high in stunted animation, freeze-frame, it seems that time has stopped.

But time has not stopped.

Two female gorillas are clasping Calabar's shoulders. One is biting through his fur, flesh and muscle; tearing a blood-soaked clump from his spine and shaking her jowls; showering the air with fragments of hair and micro-beads of blood.

She returns to feast some more.

The second female holds tight. So tight, in fact, that her claws pierce Calabar's flesh - drawing so much blood that her fur turns from black to maroon to crimson.

A third female charges at Calabar's leg.

The fourth bounds through the air, arms outstretched, and grabs his waist.

Calabar howls:

"Aaaaagh!!!"

And now he stumbles.

Flesh is torn from his abdomen, chest and thigh.

Blood squirts fantastic.

And now he falls.

And now he whimpers:

"Ah... Ah... Aww!"

The gorillas retreat, leaving Calabar grounded, swimming in a pool of bile, saliva, mud and excrement. The fight is over in under a minute, but the result is conclusive.

Calabar must be removed from the group.

It is Rann, not his stronger adversary, who will take the throne.

And yet Rann knows, deep down, that his power will never be absolute. His position has been handed to him by an alliance of female gorillas. Those gorillas, who were strong enough to dispatch Calabar, remain more than capable of dethroning *him*. Rann's position is precarious. He knows he must rule in a way that pleases his troop, or he too will be left bruised and bloody in the dirt. (Nadler, 1976)

CHIMPANZEE CONTROL

Similar events have been observed amongst our closest relative, the chimpanzee, on Arnhem Zoo's "Ape Island" - a tree-filled enclosure, designed to replicate the chimps' natural habitat...

Yeroen, the group's alpha, was known for his puffed-up manic charges. Yelping and barking, he would dive head-first into a group of his peers, scattering them in every direction. Harried cries would fill the air, creating an atmosphere which was thick with tension.

It would take several moments for things to settle down.

When the air did finally clear, Yeroen's minions would tiptoe forward to pay

homage to their leader - sitting at his feet, offering a hand and grooming his fur.

Such displays maintained the natural order. They reminded the group that Yeroen was in charge.

Yet the roles could also be reversed...

Our alpha often found himself being chased by a gang of screaming females. Outnumbered, it was clear that he was petrified by this exhibition of collective power.

Yeoren may have been in charge, but his position was never assured. The group went to great lengths to remind him that he could be ousted at any time.

A full coup, however, could take several months...

When Yeroen realised that he was no longer the maddest, baddest ape on the island, he attempted to shore up his supporter base - spending over 60% of his time with the female chimps, upon whose goodwill he relied.

With such backing, he would prove hard to depose.

Yeroen shared his sleeping quarters with the beta male, Luit - a younger, more playful chimpanzee who had arrived with Yeroen from a zoo in Copenhagen.

Luit had always known his place. He slunk into the shadows, and only ever ate the scraps left on his master's table.

But things had begun to change. Luit was now walking around their quarters as if he owned the place. He even took one of Yeroen's apples.

When the two apes finally came to blows, it was Luit who wounded his leader; leaving teeth-marks down Yeroen's side and indentations on his foot.

The next morning, Yeroen looked a shade of his former self. His hair, which normally stood on end, hung limply from his limbs. His eyes assumed a dusty glaze.

When he was allowed back onto Ape Island, Yeroen immediately broke down; whining and wailing, falling to his knees and imploring the heavens above.

The other chimps had never seen anything like it. In a show of awe and anguish, they lavished Yeroen with affection; restoring his confidence as best they could.

For Luit the message was clear. He may have dispatched the king, but the king had retained his kingdom.

Luit spent the day trying to make amends - nervously embracing Yeroen's

subjects and tending to his master's wounds.

The third male, Nikkie, was a ball of nervous energy. A somewhat clownish character, known for his acrobatic displays, Nikkie was treated with disdain. His sexual advances were often rebuffed. He was sat upon and brushed aside.

But Nikkie had attached himself to Luit's rising star. As the challenger's henchman, he routinely attacked any female who was seen to side with Yeroen; discouraging them from socialising with their threatened leader.

It had the desired effect. Each day, Yeroen was granted a little less time in the company of the female chimpanzees.

As he saw his entourage dwindle, Yeroen became desperate. He threw himself to the ground, stretched forth his arms, and beseeched his mates to embrace him. He writhed like a fish on the floor of a trawler, and wailed like a newborn babe in need of his mother's milk.

So it was that he became the architect of his own demise...

Yeroen's tantrums, which had curried so much support at first, now became tiresome. Rather than provoke sympathy, they evoked pity and disgust.

Who, after all, would want to be led by an overgrown baby who cried whenever he was unable to get his way?

The females turned towards a stronger, more stable male: Luit.

For his part, the former beta male had been doing the rounds - grooming each female in turn, embracing them when he could, and playing with their offspring. He was slowly winning their support.

With more of a spark than a flame, he had risen to high office.

Yeroen finally accepted defeat. He allowed Luit to step over him, before reconciling with his erstwhile rival - greeting him with a subservient bark.

Within a month, peace had been restored. Luit was the undisputed alpha. And Nikkie, by hanging on to Luit's coattails, had become the beta. (De Waal, 1982)

FROM PRIMATES TO PRIMITIVE PEOPLES

We humans are not gorillas, nor are we chimpanzees. We do not organise

ourselves into the strict, linear hierarchies that our apish cousins tend to form. Nor do we rely on intimidation or violence to gain access to food and sexual partners.

But for the vast majority of human history, we *have* lived in flexible bands, just like our hairy relatives. Like such primates, we have roamed the jungles at will; hunting animals and gathering plants.

Like the aforementioned apes, our politics have been driven by two desires. We have a selfish drive to *control others*. But we resent it when other people try to *control us*. We resist bullies, in much the same way that the female chimps resisted Calabar.

With the apes, this had two effects. The personal drive for power resulted in *hierarchical control*. At Arnhem Zoo, Luit rose to the top, Nikkie took up office as his deputy, and Yeroen was forced to accept third place. But the group's *collective resistance* ensured that no individual ape held any real power. The alpha in Arnhem has first dibs on food and sex. He can attack chimps, individually, to keep them intimidated, and may act as a mediator. But that is just about the sum total of this alpha's "Privileges".

Even in the wild, a top-ranking chimpanzee cannot compel his subordinates to go to war against other bands. A low-ranking chimp will still keep most of the food he finds. He can go wherever he likes, whenever he likes, and may even mate with a female who has gained the attention of a more senior rival.

The desire not to be controlled comes to the fore; ensuring leaders do not have *too much* power.

For humans, things are slightly different...

With the ability to control resources, weapons and soldiers, humans *can* win personal power over the group. When this happens, we end up with authoritarian regimes.

Occasionally, this may occur in hunter-gatherer societies. Psychopaths, shamans and the best hunters can come to rule the roost.

But in the vast majority of instances, hunter-gatherers do manage to keep power-hungry individuals in check. By *actively resisting* such people, on an ongoing basis, they maintain democratic control.

The apes showed us two methods through which this can be achieved. The female gorillas *violently dispatched* the strongest male. The female chimpanzees slowly *ostracised* their former leader.

In the wild, chimpanzees can also get up and leave; *abandoning* unpopular alphas.

Hunter-gatherers and small-scale tribes also have these weapons in their arsenal. They too can execute, ostracise and desert would-be-dictators. They also have a few other tools: criticism, ridicule, disobedience and deposition. (Boehm, 1991)

In the remainder of this chapter, we shall see how these methods have been used to maintain democratic control in primitive societies *today*.

By observing such peoples, we can infer how humans might have lived in the past. These groups offer us a sort of *living history* - a lens through which we can gaze back into the Stone Age.

They do.

But the lens may be a little blurred. Such groups have been in contact with agrarian states and empires, raiders and traders, for several millennia. Their cultures have been shaped through attempts to engage with or avoid such outsiders. Their societies may be similar to their ancestors, in some ways, but they may be different in others.

We should proceed with caution... (Graeber & Wengrow, 2018)

UTKU OSTRACISM

Deep in the Arctic Circle, life for the Utku Eskimos ambles on as it has done for millennia. The people here still live in tents and igloos; eating fish, seal and caribou. They remain as cool as the icy-breeze itself.

The Inuit do not do anger.

An angry person might turn violent, subdue dissenters, rise up and rule the entire group. And that, for the Utku, is inconceivable.

The Utku are taught not to show any sort of anger from an early age...

If an Utku child were to pick up a pebble and throw it at her mother, she might say, “Ooh, that hurts”. But her voice will barely elevate above a whisper.

Rather than use harsh words or actions, to get their children to behave, parents tell them stories...

You do not want a child to wander into the icy waters? Great! Tell them about the gnarly sea monster who will drag them down into the darkest depths and gobble them up for breakfast.

You do not want a child to take food without asking? Great! Tell them that long fingers will reach out and grab them if they do.

And if a story does not do the trick? Okay. Put on a play. Let the child see the consequences of violent behaviour for themselves. (Doucleff & Greenhalgh, 2013)

The first Westerner to study the Utku was a young linguist and anthropologist named Jean Briggs.

Briggs struggled to fit in when she first arrived. Avoiding even the smallest display of anger, was no easy task.

Things came to a head when the Utku agreed to lend one of their canoes to a pair of tourists, not because they were keen on the idea, they resented such requests, but because they wished to avoid a confrontation.

When the tourists broke the canoe, Briggs informed them that her friends only had one more, which they relied upon to fish. Since it was fragile and hard to replace, Briggs asked them not to use it.

The tourists went to speak to the locals themselves.

Put on the spot, the Utku buckled. They consented to the tourists’ request.

Briggs was visibly upset. She could not bear to see her beloved hosts abused in such a manner.

A tear in her eye, she stormed off and cried.

For the Utku, this emotional outburst was simply unacceptable. They left Briggs in her tent, outcast and alone, for almost ninety days.

Even though Briggs was trying to defend the group, and even though her anger was harmless, it was still too much for the Utku to bear. The Utku do not tolerate *any*

sort of anger, no matter the circumstances. An angry person might rise up and come to rule the group.

Briggs had no desire to rule her band. But when she was angry, she confronted the tourists; speaking on behalf of the group, like a de-facto leader.

By eliminating emotional behaviour, the Utku remove the means through which individuals can come to rule their neighbours. We are left with a leaderless society, in which the people rule themselves:

“The Utku, like other Eskimo bands, have no formal leaders whose authority transcends that of the individual households. Moreover, cherishing independent thought and action as a natural prerogative, people tend to look askance at anyone who seems to aspire to tell them what to do”.

Briggs was eventually integrated back into the group.

One of the indigenous families, however, was not...

The smallest family in Briggs' band consisted of just three members: Niqi, her husband Nilak, and an adopted seventeen-year-old daughter.

They were outcasts of their own making. Niqi never cooked, sewed less than the others, collected firewood alone, and made her own fires. She was deemed stingy - someone who did not share as much as social decorum dictated. She repeatedly failed to do her fair share of the communal work.

Nilak, meanwhile, was deemed to be bad-tempered and unhelpful.

There was a general feeling that both husband and wife were never far from displaying that emotional taboo: Anger.

Deemed an antisocial presence, Niqi and her family were pushed into a state of semi-ostracism. They did not live far from the rest of their clan, but a chasm existed between them. Perched on the other side of the rapids, a few hundred metres from the communal camp, they looked like shadow puppets; present, in motion, but not entirely real.

Her brethren never ignored Niqi completely. When she said “Hello”, they replied with a similar greeting. When she smiled, the others smiled back. But they never initiated such contact.

In a tight-knit society, in which members rely upon each other to survive, Niqi's

ostracism was one of the harshest punishments imaginable. (Briggs, 1970)

What does this tell us?

It shows that there *is* a social etiquette; an unwritten law which the Utku have to follow. They have to contribute to the economic welfare of the group, by doing their share of the fishing, cooking and sewing. And it shows that this unwritten law *is* enforced; not from the top-down, by an authoritarian chief, but by the group. Anyone who refuses to contribute is punished. They are ostracised, overlooked, and pushed to the margins of society by *every other member of the clan*.

By banning angry displays, the Utku eliminate the means through which leaders might come to power. But the absence of leaders does not mean an absence of control. It means that control is exerted by the community as a whole.

Utku society is democratic. The group is in charge.

!KUNG RIDICULE

Anger can propel an individual into a position of power. People may follow their commands, because they fear being hurt if they do not. This explains why the Utku were so keen to ostracise angry characters.

But there is another way through which an individual may come to dominate the group. Not with the stick, but with the carrot...

Imagine that you are the greatest hunter in your clan. It has been several days since anyone has killed an animal, when you return home with a majestic antelope.

What do you do?

You could keep that meat to yourself, and eat many meals. Or you could share it; only eating one or two meals before the group devours your bounty.

In the short term, you would be better off keeping the antelope to yourself. But, if you were to do this, your companions would die of hunger. When you encounter a bad run of luck, and are unable to find any food, there will be no-one left to help you.

In this scenario, everyone dies, including yourself, and your clan becomes

extinct.

Alternatively, you could share the meat. Your loved ones would survive and, when you hit a bad run of luck, or become too old to hunt, they are likely to repay the favour; coming to *your* rescue, by sharing *their* food with *you*.

In this scenario, the whole clan survives.

What we have here is a simple case of "Survival of the Fittest". Only it is not the strongest *individual* who is deemed the "Fittest". It is the most egalitarian *clan*. The clan which shares survives.

This system, in which everyone shares their food, is known as "Primitive Communism". It can be found in hunter-gatherer societies all across the globe.

But here comes a dilemma...

What stops you, the best hunter, from seizing control of the group? Since you control the biggest share of the group's wealth, its meat, you could demand power, fame and glory, before sharing it amongst your peers. They would be left with just two options: Obey your commands or starve.

Let's take the case of the !Kung - the Kalahari Bushmen known for their ability to hunt giraffe, warthog, gemsbok, kudu, wildebeest, eland, antelope and hartebeest.

If you were to return to your !Kung clan with a freshly slain beast, your brethren would not greet you with praise, as you might expect.

Why?

"(Because) when a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. In this way, we cool his heart and make him gentle".

A returning huntsman must remain modest, sit in the shade and wait to be approached by a fellow clansman, who might ask:

"What did you see today?"

"Ah, I'm no good at hunting. I saw nothing at all. Well, maybe some little thing,

nothing more”.

Such modesty can only mean one thing - this individual has killed a great beast. But this does not mean that he will be praised. The more wonderful the animal, the greater the ridicule he can expect to receive:

“You mean to say you have dragged us all the way out here to make us cart home your pile of bones? Oh, if I had known it was this thin, I wouldn’t have come. People, to think I gave up a nice day in the shade for this. At home we may be hungry, but at least we have nice cool water”. (Lee, 1979)

The !Kung’s use of ridicule keeps would-be-leaders humble.

This is not to say that the !Kung are as fiercely anti-authoritarian as the Utku. They do have *nominal* leaders - the group’s elders. These individuals get to decide where the group shall wander. They oversee the process of cutting and distributing the group’s meat.

But these elders are not treated with deference. They are not given extra food, weapons or clothes. They are not given a prime position by the fire. And they do not have any *judicial* power.

If an individual threatens the group, the *group* will act as judge and jury. If an individual threatens another individual, those two individuals will be left alone to resolve their conflict. The elders cannot intervene. (Brownlee, 1943)

The !Kung regularly mock would-be rulers, denying them the respect they would need to rule. Power remains with the people.

Such a practice is fairly widespread...

In South India, when a group of Paliyans tried to invoke the gods, to gain power over their clan, the community mocked both them *and* their gods. In Northern Tanzania, when a Hadza man tried to form an alliance of subordinates, he was greeted with a choir of guffaws. Anthropologists have observed similar behaviour amongst Mbuti Pygmies, Ngukurr Aborigines, and the Enga of Papua New Guinea. (Boehm, 1993)