

Jonathan Hearn (2023) **The Domestication of Competition: Social Evolution and Liberal Society** Cambridge University Press

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For Jonathan Hearn, competition is firmly embedded in contemporary capitalist life in liberal democratic societies. A statement few would disagree with, despite considerable debate about the political soubriquet. The wide-ranging literature on neo-liberalism, for example, demonstrates how opaque and contested that concept has become. With key debates focusing on its origins and whether it is new at all, let alone its precise meaning. While there is considerable disagreement between its protagonists about its aims and effects. For some, neo-liberalism enhances policies, products and services, whilst for others it promotes divisions that militate against this. There is some consensus, however, that competition is an essential ingredient in this complex and often flavourless political recipe. An accord that might lead us to conclude that here is just another book venturing down well-worn paths, albeit in an accessible and entertaining manner. Yet Hearn, building on his well-regarded book on power and an array of recent articles on the sociocultural underpinnings of political legitimacy in capitalist nation-states (see also Hearn, 2011, 2012), seeks to provide a far more ambitious and original thesis about how competition should be seen, not only as a key feature of current social life in most parts of the globe but also, more contentiously, as a central evolutionary building block of all societies.

What is competition and why describe it as domesticated? Hearn defines it as 'rivalry over some limited good' (4). Hence, scarcity is a given and the author recognises this might entail natural or social limits on things and persons. For example, land is not infinite and neither is the holding of political offices despite the longevity of some rulers and dynasties. Thus, the author argues, we have to recognise environmental ecological constraints on populations as well as the creation and reproduction of norms and values surrounding the rules that govern how property and leadership positions are distributed. Consequently, and Hearn readily concedes this will inevitably be seen as a weakness or virtue depending on the source of normative assessment, he combines some aspects of evolutionary biology and psychology with social theories of competition. He is persuaded that despite clear distinctions between biological and social domains there are points of similarity in how such concepts as fitness, adaptation and selection have some technical affinity in the physical and social sciences, particularly when we seek to understand differentiation and diversity. But he firmly rejects any reductionist appeals to genes or drives in analysing causal sociocultural mechanisms, stressing competition is 'so variable, contingent and incidental' (p.4) across time and space that primarily to draw on innate natural states to explain sociocultural phenomena is highly questionable.

This standpoint, the author avers, also undermines simplistic monocausal explanations that lay competitive blame or praise solely on 'Western' culture, the Enlightenment, or capitalism

tout court. And he is also dismissive of arguments that see conflict and cooperation as inevitably antagonistic features of power relations and competition. Since, as Hearn convincingly argues in a pleasingly lucid discussion of power and authority, competition frequently stimulates collaboration as much as discord. Again, developing arguments he has presented elsewhere (2014), he successfully demonstrates how capitalist liberal democracies have been effectively legitimised by the increasingly subtle management of the potential tensions between systems of collective power over others and individual and group power to achieve shared or unshared goals and rewards.¹ In some ways analogous to how humans domesticated plants and animals he examines the processes that led to gradual changes in social practices from what we might loosely call 'wild' competition over limited resources to domesticated forms of organisation. Namely, a shift towards 'domesticated competition' where agents willingly submit 'to an organised contest to resolve disputing claims over scarce goods' (p.10). In other words, the evolution of gradual moves of a pendulum that oscillates between domination and authority. This book effectively supports these propositions by demonstrating how competition is observable well before 'the West' or capitalism was invented and its success relies as much on cooperation as conflict given establishing consensus is more effective than outright force. This is not to say we should go back to 'animal kingdoms' to explain competitive origins nor fail to acknowledge how the creation and expansion of recent capitalist states in 'the West', as the most quintessential illustrations of *liberal* competitiveness to date, lack wild aspects.

For Hearn, competition was 'domesticated' across a range of institutional spheres in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Meaning it became gradually naturalised and normalised through a series of historical developments. Responding to crises in traditional forms of authority based on ancestral, magical and religious beliefs and practices, the formalisation of competition among socio-political corporate actors (the nod to Coleman partly explaining Hearn's evolutionary tendencies) provided new institutional modes of legitimating distributions of power in emerging liberal societies. Adopting Michael Mann's approach to empire and nation-state building a series of illuminating historical chapters show how military, political, economic and cultural/ideological processes evolved from local to global parameters. A gradual shift from militia to highly organised armed forces, traditional elites to political parties, kin-based to corporatised firms and churches to universities neatly exemplify Hearn's competitive theory. Again, this might be seen as traversing old classical theoretical ground, particularly Weberian in flavour, and those well-versed in competing scholarly debate might proffer other more recent combatants. The author does pay some homage to Foucault, Bourdieu and Elias, but successfully weaves his own distinct competitive take on power and authority that both contests and complements, for example, emphasizes on the role of discursive patterns of control, ecological fields and alternative views of habitus. Of course, whether he succeeds is moot (i.e. competitive) but, with eyes on students and newcomers to these often dense scholarly exchanges, the author certainly achieves in making complex arguments eminently graspable.

Hearn freely admits he is sympathetic to some forms of liberalism but ends on a distinctly discomforted note on its most recent and possible future expressions. As the author

¹ Hearn does briefly acknowledge theorists who have given equal prominence to power with, but one might suggest this strand of theory deserved more explicit emphasis. See, for example, Haugaard, M., 2020, *The Four Dimensions of Power: Understanding Domination, Empowerment and Democracy*, Manchester University Press.

concludes, his conception of domesticated competition: ‘...is about harnessing and limiting social conflict, channelling it along more productive paths, that beneficially serve a larger social order. It is about a balance, a midpoint between conflict as anarchic disorder, and a controlling order that allows no room or vent for conflict’ (p.281). As he reflects, whether the individual will become fully subordinated to state, global or even non-humanoid earthly or interplanetary forces is unknown.

And what of Aotearoa New Zealand? Unsurprisingly, it does not appear in his index. But this book ought to be on our reading lists and fully merits local scrutiny. Domesticated and undomesticated liberal capitalism significantly shaped our military, political, economic and ideological history. One could argue Hearn’s processual view of competition provides a better analytic framework for understanding how different societies coexisted and evolved in New Zealand through conflict and collaboration than many of our current stadial models or moralising subjectivities. Furthermore, whatever we mean by ‘neo-liberalism’ Aotearoa is one of the most highly developed exemplars of this biosocial phenomenon. So have we achieved a delicate balance of forces or are we moving inexorably towards unruliness? This book provides a readable and sophisticated way of assessing these questions.

References

Hearn, J. (2011) On the social evolution of power to/over. *Journal of Political Power*, 7(2), 175-191.

Hearn, J. (2012) *Theorizing Power*, Red Globe Press.