

3. Knitting Together

Overview: Through a thought-experiment based on the survivors of a shipwreck stranded on a desert island, Chapter 3 looks at how a group mind comes together and endures. It introduces Daniel Wegner's concept of distributed cognition, and extends it in several ways, chiefly by recognizing the system which displays such cognition as an autonomous mind in its own right. The chapter sketches a number of factors in the emergence of collective mind: joint attention, stigmergy, language and some others. It concludes with brief discussions of political power, group solidarity and decadence, all of which contribute to the distinction between 'group' and 'bevy.'

The [Zuytdorp](#) departed from the Cape of Good Hope on 22 April 1712 with at least 200 to 250 people on board, including women and children, and disappeared . . . The discovery of a considerable amount of material from the wreck . . . established that many people had managed to get off the stricken vessel and on to shore. Exactly how many people survived the disaster is uncertain and estimates vary from 30 up to 180 or more.

- Wikipedia

For a sociological thought-experiment, let's imagine an old sailing ship – a fictitious one, though we'll call it the *Zuytdorp* for commemoration and convenience – en route from South Africa, carrying about 200 passengers to Indonesia. In a storm, the ship gets blown off course, far out into the South Pacific. Passing too near one of the islands in the [Samoan group](#), it scrapes a reef and breaks up. Let's assume that all the ship's officers are lost in the attempt to save their vessel, but that most of the passengers are washed ashore and survive. Let's assume too that these are mostly strangers to one another, and without even a common language, so that at the outset, they find themselves in what Hobbes called a '[state of nature](#),' with no social organization or leadership at all.

In its [actual pre-history](#), [Samoa](#) was settled about 3,000 years ago by Polynesian navigators, perhaps from the larger islands of [Fiji](#) or [Tonga](#). Today, it has a language, a [culture](#)¹ and an independent government, and is a member of the United Nations. But for our thought-experiment, we can pretend that it was never settled, and never even discovered until our *Zuytdorp*, (not the real one), broke up on that reef.

1 Famously described by Margaret Mead in her book, [Coming of Age in Samoa](#), whose accuracy, however, [has been challenged](#).

Their island ([Upolu](#)) is big enough (more than 1100 km²) to have lakes and streams, so there is plenty of drinking water and lots of edible vegetation, notably coconuts and taro. There are crabs and turtles on the beach, and sea fish which can be speared, even without a boat at certain sites. Thus, survival is not especially difficult, but social interaction and sanity are a real challenge. Still, once they get past their feelings of hopelessness and begin to forage, the castaways will gradually find each other and begin to engage, cooperate and socialize.

Though conflicts will occur, these survivors will *not* find themselves in the Hobbesian condition of all-against-all. From the outset, as they encounter other persons, they will find that sharing and cooperation are very much in their interests, though everyone wants a little more than his share of food, and less than his share of work. But, given what is known today about 'human nature,' they will soon discover that sharing and cooperation, however difficult in certain situations, occur spontaneously in theirs. Though initially a bevy, a degree of social organization will evolve quite naturally among them, along lines this chapter will describe. We'll begin by introducing Daniel Wegner's concept of '[distributed cognition](#)' (DCog), a forerunner of the collective minding and mindset that are considered here.

3.1 Distributed Cognition

In 1985, a psychologist named Daniel Wegner pointed out that when people work together, or just spend a lot of time with each other, they create a pool of knowledge which no one holds on their own, which may not be written down anywhere, but which somehow exists and is shared between them. They acquire what Wegner called '[transactive knowledge](#)' – skills and information held and shared through their interactions that they do not have as separate individuals. An example might be three brothers with complementary business skills: One is very good in money matters – in buying supplies and stock, pricing items correctly, raising and accumulating capital. The second is a terrific salesman. Customers trust him, and he has wonderful rapport with them. He understands what they like and what they are looking for. The third has superb technical skills in some area – e.g. fine carpentry, watch repair, or grooming dogs. Among the three of them, but not as separate individuals, they have the capability to start and run a successful business. To actually do so, they will need something further: They will need a good deal of [metaknowledge](#) about the skills and knowledge that the others have, and about their integrity and reliability. They'll need to know who can do what, who can be counted upon for what. When there is a problem to solve, or a task to perform, they'll need to know that they can work with each other, and recognize whose skills are needed. Then they can allocate the tasks and responsibilities appropriately, and run a lucrative business.

Wegner's insight was taken further in a remarkable book by Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (1995) which elaborates in detail on the DCog involved in the navigation of a war ship of the US Navy, especially in one

emergency situation that is used as an example. Its central point is that the skills and knowledge required to cope with that emergency did not reside with *any* of the individual crew members, but only in the navigation team as a whole – in its structures of inter-relationships, its instruments and other artifacts, and in their physical environment as a whole.

Hutchins' work (and the bare concept of DCog) are already a large slice of the argument that the present book makes, insofar as that concept attributes skill and knowledge to social groups as functioning entities. This book goes, perhaps, a little further in three respects:

First, Hutchins' work attributes cognition to the social system, but stops short of recognizing that system as a mind in its own right. He treats the process that I call 'minding' and the socio-physical structures of 'mindset; together as abstractions, under the rubric of 'cognition.' By contrast, I want to emphasize that some groups have minds in the same sense that we our-selves do, as complex systems comprised of trillions of components. Not only do groups have collective mindset, a broader concept than just skill and knowledge. They have collective beliefs, desires and intentions, and thus carry on autonomous minding operations to which Dennett's [intentional stance](#) may be applied.

Second, Hutchins' book is about distributed cognition in a highly disciplined and engineered system – that of a US warship. I am writing more generally about the minding and mindset of human groups with only the structure and discipline that they evolve for themselves. Even with bitterly divisive politics (as we'll see in the next chapter), conducted in a partly random, conflicted and self-contradictory environment, a group may still comprise and effectively sustain itself as a functioning mind, with some degree of existential competence.

Third, even with his critique of information processing and computation as a model for human intelligence, Hutchins still thinks of social communication as a transfer or exchange of *information*. That concept is replaced here by the notion of *suggestion*, as developed in Appendix A. For us, the skills and knowledge of a social system resides in its flows of suggestion (attempted influence) and in its patterns of suggestion processing. The more limited notion of information (either in the manager's sense or the engineer's) would not suffice for our purpose, and does not really suffice for Hutchins' theory.

Nonetheless, anyone who wishes to go further with this idea of collective minding would do well to read Hutchins' book, which explores an important special case in detail, and does a lot of the heavy lifting needed to understand how distributed cognition works.

3.2 The Emerging Group

Now, back to our Zuytdorp survivors on their island. How does a bevy of human individuals knit themselves together into an emerging group: a group that we appropriately recognize as a collective mind? Why do they do so, and what are the steps involved?

As its people are, and will remain, autonomous persons, they must have some self-interest, some motivation, for their participation – their upward delegation of autonomy² – at every step of the way. Of course, this motivation will differ from person to person, and it will change over time. There will be changing ways to participate in the group, and changing ways to defect. Still, at every stage, each individual faces a basic choice to do one or the other: to contribute or attempt to free-ride? to stay in or drop out? Each alternative will have its short-term and its long-term 'pay-offs' – its rewards and costs. At every stage of group formation, enough people must prefer some level of membership and participation to form the group and keep it going.

We speak of cooperation or engagement (on one hand), as against defection or withdrawal (on the other). Life presents many situations where this choice is offered – where one has to choose between these alternatives. It is well to be aware that there are always costs and benefits either way, and that the choice to go one way or the other may be conceived as a problem of game theory. But one should be aware too that it is not a *simple* question of game theory because the choices made affect the social atmosphere in which the game is played, far beyond the immediate stakes involved. The choice to engage strengthens the context for further engagement, raises group solidarity,³ and typically increases the possible payoffs for further collaboration. Withdrawal does the opposite. The game itself is a context for the maintenance and changing of identities, in which the payoff values are altered.

There are good (and obvious) reasons why the Zuytdorp passengers are more distant with each other on the ship than later, shipwrecked on their island.

3.2.1 *Habitat and Joint Attention*

Of course, group formation has one big advantage just to start with: the human propensity for joint attention in every interaction where there is a common situation or habitat. The simple fact that two or more people are looking at, thinking about, engaging with, the same external object(s) makes it almost inevitable that they will soon find themselves engaging with each other. They may decide to share and cooperate on this external thing. They may prefer to fight over it. They may just get together from time to time to hold an academic conference about it. In whatever way, they will probably find themselves jointly engaged – in some politicious relationship – around this thing of mutual interest.

To this extent, the rudiments of *group* are already present in the biology of these creatures. Even without language, just with cries and gestures, there will be collective minding, as two or more people find themselves with a common opportunity, problem, or object of contention. Even without language, collective behaviour patterns and collective mood will certainly emerge among them;

2 See Section 1.1.3 on the loop of participation.

3 On the concept of *solidarity*, see Section 3.4 below.

and it's only in this shared cognitive 'atmosphere' that language is possible. For humans, the evolution of a [pidgin](#) or [creole](#) language is practically inevitable given only the fact of prolonged, regular contact between speech communities, and the mutual need to communicate. Lacking a pre-existing common language, people will anyhow find means to exchange suggestions, as infants do in their natal families. In time, they will come to share an existing language, or evolve a new language of their own.

There will be common mindset also, if only some mutual awareness of incompatible desires and common issues. Even when people agree on nothing else, there will be a shared awareness of their conflict. In the Zuytdorp case, starting with a shared disaster, the island they now inhabit, and their wish to be rescued, these survivors have more than enough material for some collective mindset.

3.2.2 *Stigmergic Traces*

As humans (and other creatures) mill around in their environment, they cannot help but leave traces of their presence. Humans often do this consciously, as I am doing now, wanting to leave a message that someone else will find. But we do it inadvertently as well, as when we walk across a lawn crushing the grass beneath our feet, or through a forest leaving signs that an [expert tracker](#) can read. Taken together, all these stigmergic traces, including markings, artifacts and infrastructure, amount to a (slowly changing) collective mindset written onto these people's habitat – a collective mindset which tends to build and stabilize collective minding for those with access to it. Though individuals leave the markings, the stigmergic context that results at any point in time is the work of everyone together, and not of anyone's intention. In this way, the whole group gives itself suggestions which may influence the desires, beliefs and intentions of persons who encounter them later. In doing so, it *objectifies* its minding process, so to speak, leaving a durable physical track of the choices it has made.

Even without a written language, stigmergic markings leave a record that can be read days, months and years later. Indeed, [archeologists today](#) are reading and interpreting marks of this kind that were left millions ago by hominid ancestors who probably did not have language as yet. They did, however, craft stone tools and leave [middens](#) (garbage dumps) which tell us a surprising amount about their societies and life-styles. Later on, they left traces of the use of fire, of jewellery, of [art](#). Much that we believe they *probably* made did not survive the passing of time, and we can only guess at these people's capabilities and culture by studying the [fossils](#) left for us to find and read.

In this same way, the Zuytdorp castaways will 'write' the beginnings of their collective mindset on their island habitat as they select campsites for themselves, build shelters, dig latrines and fire pits, mark their trails through its forests, dump garbage, and generally leave traces of their presence. As they relearn the ancient skills of chipping stone, braiding plant fibres into twine,

[working clay](#) into usable vessels they will gradually convert their island habitat into a domesticated environment. Of course, these developments will shape them, and their children, and their children's children as much as they shape it. Their markings will comprise, as we've said, a physical mindset for the whole society in which their lives are lived – in which their minding, both individual and collective, gets done.

3.2.3 *Language*

Language is probably the clearest example there can be of an individual activity that takes its meaning wholly from the collective mindset of a speech community. You have only to watch a foreign language movie without subtitles to recognize how much its meanings depend on a viewer's active membership in that community's collective mind. You will understand *some* of what is happening from your common humanity with the film's protagonists, and from similarities that you notice between their culture and your own. You will recognize conflict when you see it, and you will recognize joint attention and friendship and all the rich body language of affect. Without the language, however, most of the film's detail will be lost on you. You will perceive at once that the film's actors, its social context and its primary audience belong to a world of their own, from which you are excluded.

No one invents a language all by themselves. What creates even the possibility of language is, on one hand, the joint attention of individuals to familiar objects, actions and properties; and, on the other, their efforts to be recognized and accepted as competent members of a speech community. We can take language, including jargon and slang, as a paradigmatic example of a group's collective mindset.

We perform [speech acts](#) – purposeful utterances – of many kinds to realize various intentions, only one of which might be an exchange of information.

There are many different kinds of speech act; and such acts have been classified in several ways that we need not go into here. A few examples are enough to indicate their variety:

- “Hi, J” This is a greeting. It marks an informal social relationship, and initiates one new episode in that relationship.
- “Could you pass me the salt and pepper, please?” This is a polite request – a correct way of getting other people to do things for you, when it is important to show that you are not trying to order them around.
- “I really don't like that tone of voice!” This is a complaint, indicating that you are taking offence and are on the brink of getting angry unless the other apologizes and backs down.
- “There's a new James Bond movie playing. Would you come with me next Friday to see it?” Asks for a date. The movie is almost irrelevant.
- “Oh, I'd love to see that movie with you, but I can't this Friday.” Accepts the date but asks for some other day.

- “No thanks. I'm too busy with work these days.” Declines the date and indicates lack of interest in the relationship.
- “Where did you get that awful necktie?” Used to insult, or to sneer at someone's taste.
- “I now pronounce you Man and Wife.” Uttered by some duly authorized person, this speech act, actually transforms the legal relationship between two people into a so-called '*marriage*.' It gives formal, social recognition to this couple as a new group, precisely in our sense of this word.

The classic work on speech acts is J.L. Austin's book, *How To Do Things With Words*. Its central point, in our terms, is that we use language for much more than the communication of true and false statements, but for a whole range of other social purposes. In every case, the use of language in a social situation sets up, or further specifies a context of relationship between individuals, in which some common mindset is established between the interlocutors, and where some common minding gets done.

Since humans tend to evolve a common language when they do not already have one, we can anticipate that our Zuytdorp islanders will develop some kind of *pidgin* tongue almost immediately, and will have a *creole* and then a full-blown language within a few generations at the most. At the same time, as we've all experienced, communication is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Misunderstanding is always possible even between fluent and careful users of the same language. We must expect that the Zuytdorp people's joint mindset will be limited at first, but will gradually enrich and improve as they get to know each other.

Writing

The development of a writing system, this too a feature of collective mind-set, enables durable recording of the spoken language. In writing down our utterances, we leave a legible trace of them for other persons to find and profit from, or be misled by. With this new power, it becomes possible to pass suggestions of all kinds to people far away in space and time through peer-to-peer, broadcast or stigmergic communication. All types of speech act (e.g. royal commands, laws, purchase orders, asset transfers, and whatever else) can be performed on a remote basis. In this way, all the features of modern, large-scale organization become possible:

- a repertoire of shared beliefs, knowledge and stories, passed down from generation to generation;
- a power elite making collective decisions, for the group as a whole – and even its future generations;
- a legal system based on an evolving body of law, complete with prescribed remedies and mechanisms of enforcement;

- delegation of authority, chains of command and hierarchical management; and finally
- the sovereign state, based on a system of enforced taxation, and with powers of life and death over its subjects.

All these features are possible in rudimentary form, even without writing; but it is the combination of language with stigmergic record-keeping which makes possible the evolution of a modern society and state – a complex, imperious, hierarchical system of widely shared culture and constraining inter-relationships.

3.2.4 *Common Knowledge*

I am using this phrase, '[common knowledge](#)' in a broader sense than usual, to include the whole body of concepts and beliefs that shape a people's thoughts and actions and conflicts. It includes the teachable skills and customary social behaviours as well. Most importantly, it includes an awareness of certain aspects of itself that are known to be contentious or conflict provoking – like the issue of slavery in the US on the eve of its Civil War, or like the attitudes of [white supremacy](#) and resentment that just helped Donald Trump get elected president as I am writing this. 'Common knowledge,' then, as a feature of collective mindset includes what people know, or think they know, about each other's beliefs and skills and habits. It allows for internal controversies, even for war sometimes; and it may be deluded, to the extent that a group may cherish fantasies and habits which are self-defeating, or have no basis in experience.

Philosophers speak of 'knowing that' (propositional knowledge) and of 'knowing how' or 'know-how' (techne and skill). There is also such a thing as '[knowing to](#)' – knowing to use the toilet when you need to go; knowing to say 'please' when you want something and 'thank you' when you are given it; knowing to watch the traffic lights and look to the left first when you cross streets, (except in England, where it's to the right), and to watch for cars coming around the corner. All three types of knowledge are both personal and collective: collective as one sector of a group's culture and mindset, but personal as features that its members learn on their own (more or less), in the course of their socialization and education.

Now stranded in an unfamiliar environment, the Zuytdorp survivors will need to learn about the flora and fauna of their new home, about its whole geography and usable resources. As they explore the island individually and in small teams, they will compare notes, draw maps for each other in the sand, and communicate their findings to one another (as best they can, without a common language). They will evolve a technical repertoire of skills: some that they recalled somewhat from their lives in civilized society, and some they had not known at all. Their desires and values and habits too will share themselves and evolve, as these castaways get used to life on their island.

The survivors will get to know each other. There will be growing mutual awareness of each other's capabilities and characters, of who is reliable for various specific purposes, and of who is (or isn't) trustworthy in general. Small work-teams will form which will alter with the seasons, and with the group's specific needs and choices. Some will fish; some will gather the coconuts and taro which grow naturally on this island. Some will specialize in other ways, and learn to trade their produce, and perhaps develop an established market in various items. Couples will know each other in the Biblical sense, bringing babies into their world and organizing themselves for child-care and parenting under these island conditions. Kin networks will form (as they do always and everywhere), and there will be mutual awareness and knowledge of these social arrangements.

As these sub-groups form and interact, with all the knowledge and mindset that they collect in doing so, with the material inventory of artifacts and infrastructure that gets written onto their habitat, the original bevy of Zuytdorp survivors will gradually become a functioning group – a micro-society on this Pacific island, previously deserted. But, of course, there will friction also; and, as the population grows, as the island's carrying capacity is strained, mutually hostile sub-groups may develop along whatever lines of cleavage – of language or religion or whatever else.

Part of what turns a bevy into a group are the disagreements and issues that arise, the joint decisions that will be needed, and the conflicts that will occur in making them. Such contention, and the political behaviours that evolve to handle it, will actually be a thought process of sorts, as will be seen in the next chapter.

3.2.5 Joint Decision-making, Custom and Law

A bevy becomes a group to the extent that it can take collective decisions. This is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and does not happen all at once, or once and for all. Even in a modern state today, most people, most of the time, just go about their private business without regard to the affairs of state. We are loosely constrained (some of us more than others) by formal law – prevented from doing certain things that we might otherwise want to do. We are constrained as well by custom – a common knowledge of what might shock or annoy our neighbours. We can team up to play collective games of many kinds. In the military, the police, or the civil service, in business or as private contractors, we might be caught up in collective projects – in the implementation of collective choices, or the enforcement of custom and law. But otherwise, we largely pursue our personal desires and values, as guided by own, private beliefs. We remain private citizens and subjects, embedded variously in our state and various sub-groups, as will be discussed in Chapter 9.

Our Zuytdorp survivors, of course, will take some time to find each other. Their first collective decision, probably, will be the choice of a meeting place and camp site; and this decision will probably get made spontaneously,

without debate or deliberation, for a place where drinking water is available, but near the beach of their first landfall. After that, they will need time to get to know each other a little, and work out a rudimentary social network of mutual roles and expectations – their terms of engagement, sharing and cooperation. Such choices will get made spontaneously, as a matter of habit and custom; and it may be months or years before they face collective choices which require formal deliberation – which require them to sit down around a camp fire and exchange their views. Some joint decisions can and will be taken even without the benefit of language – just with hand gestures, and/or by following or emulating a leader. Quite a lot of collective minding will get done spontaneously and casually, and much collective mindset will evolve, long before such formal meetings become necessary or possible.

When such meetings become necessary, they will begin informally. Perhaps a few interested persons just remain around the fire to discuss a common problem, or plan some work for the next day. Eventually, these meetings will become customary, and customs may evolve for holding them. Perhaps a [talking stick](#) or speaker's staff might be introduced, to prevent people from speaking at once, and to offer each participant a chance of being heard. Perhaps a natural 'leader' will emerge, to keep the meeting on track, remember the consensus reached, and see that this is carried out.

Generations might pass in this informal way, as the Zuytdorp population grew and prospered. Eventually, with a common language and some way of writing, their possibilities for joint decision making would be greatly enhanced – and thus their possibilities for team work and deeper social organization as well. They would be better able to plan and organize team efforts – the building of outrigger canoes, for example, of fishing expeditions – in time, of voyages of exploration, and then of colonization of the nearby islands. In the long run, assuming still that these descendants of the original Zuytdorp survivors have still not been found, the whole [Samoan archipelago](#) would be colonized – as in fact happened centuries ago.

Meanwhile, with all the new possibilities for cooperation, there would also have been possibilities for disagreement and conflict. Factions could form around the various positions, and then contend for prevalence, dominance, to influence the group's collective choices. To express, contain and resolve conflict, there would be need not just for custom, but in the end for full-blown law codes and for the whole machinery of law, with formal mechanisms of adjudication and enforcement. Either way, a system of enforced law will affect a group's mood and mindset; and the absence of an effective system certainly will do so. Faced with a really contentious issue not containable by law or politics, the Zuytdorp group might even schism and go to war with itself. In this case, there would be two (or more) militarized groups – states, as shall see. Yet, after all, they will remain sub-groups of what is still a single system.

3.2.6 Administration and the State

Even without writing, leadership and supervision are surely possible. But for our thought-experiment, let's assume (not very realistically) that the Zuytdorp people eventually develop a complex high-tech society, while remaining completely isolated from the rest of the world. Alternatively, we can imagine that global warming causes sea-levels to rise to a point where coastal cities are mostly underwater. We can imagine such a society expanding off-shore, beneath the waves and into the [seabed](#), along [lines now under development](#) in Japan, with a series of submarine towns interlinked to one another and to an archipelago of islands. This society could easily become even more complex than our own, with administrative and information-processing requirements even more exaggerated. A great deal of management and administration would be needed, and we could expect big political changes as a result. Certainly, each 'suburb' would provide a much more directive environment for its members than had been needed in the past. Like a space-faring society, it would be technocratic and bureaucratic to an extreme.

With law, administration and a sufficient concentration of political power,⁴ the Zuytdorp *state* appears – based (as all states must be) on a 'coercion/extraction cycle' of taxation and expenditure, which requires enforced collection and budgeting. Or perhaps we should put this the other way round – that it was the group's need for centralized power (and the desire for it by some individuals) which drove the development of law, management and large scale craft and commerce. Of course, the whole process was a seamless loop. Production, trade, writing, law and management would have stimulated each other as they always do, making each other increasingly profitable or necessary.

At all events, Zuytdorp society would have become a modern state, much like those that we know today, in certain respects:

- It would extract and redistribute some fraction of the system's productive output for the production of public goods.
- It would make laws for itself, and provide mechanisms for carrying them out.
- It would provide mechanisms too for interpreting the law and for applying it in particular cases. It would have means for conflict resolution and for the prosecution and handling of law breakers.

For these, and for a host of more specific functions, it would have acquired what we call a [government](#) – a kind of 'brain' or central nervous system to manage and take decisions for the society as a whole.

Zuytdorp society would now be dependent, as it had not been in the past, on a very high level of science and technology. It would make large demands for technical competence on many ordinary workers, and certainly on its managers and decision-makers. It would provide a comprehensive, comfortable

4 See Section 3.3 below.

environment for the great majority of its inhabitants, but it would also be rather fragile: vulnerable to breakdowns, accidents and sabotage. It would require extensive safety precautions, and self-discipline from its members – not unlike a space ship crew, which depends on well-functioning equipment, correct procedure, and competent orders from the ship's bridge to stay alive. In effect, Zuytdorp citizens would have to pay for the technological benefits through their submission to a more intensive social discipline.

* * * * *

Before closing this section, we should stress that the above is not, and was not meant to be, a theory of social evolution. Little has been said about the interdependence of the developments in these areas, nor about the sequence or timing of their emergence. Our point was simply that such developments would tend to drive each other as the island's population grew and pressed against its carrying capacity. The original bevy of castaways would self-organize along these lines into a functioning society which forms collective intentions. From the stranded individuals it comes to form a minding system, with a collective mindset as such.

Admittedly, this collective mindset is an abstraction which cannot be observed directly, but can only be attributed to the system by anyone trying to understand it. The same is true of personal mindsets, yours or mine. These too must be attributed – e.g. by a friend, colleague, or psycho-therapist, or by self-aware individuals themselves – because there is no way to observe mindset directly. The mindset of a group can be studied piecemeal, by polling, literature reviews and other sociological methods; but must then be attributed through some interpretation of such data.⁵

With its collective mindset, despite whatever personal differences of interest and opinion, a group responds to its current situation with collective intentions and actions. How this happens is a matter of politics – a collective thought process, as we'll discuss in Chapter 4, based on the collection and weighing of a subtle quality called '[power](#).'

3.3 Political Power as Collective Autonomy

With no infrastructure, organization or teamwork, the power of a bevy is just the sum of what its members can do as individuals: the situation of our Zuytdorp castaways at the beginning. But, as we've seen, they would not stay that way for very long. Driven by individual desires and by their joint attention to a common habitat, they would soon self-organize into a functioning group with a capability for collective choices, thus for the concentration and expression of *power*.

We can define [political power](#) as the capability to make collective choices on a group's behalf, obtaining at least its passive consent to those choices, but

5 Which, like all interpretation, is not exactly true or false, but more or less useful and revealing.

then its active compliance as they are carried out. Political power exerts strong influence, of course, but something more than that. It is an influence capable of inducing cooperation, if necessary through effective coercion. It can influence people by putting them in the unpleasant and dangerous position of either rebelling against a collective volition, or evading it somehow, or going along with and obeying it against their personal desires and wishes. It can't exactly control its individuals, as we shall see, but can effectively direct the great majority of them by making credible threats. It depends on the effective working of (what political theorists call) a [coercion/extraction cycle](#), in which the governed are made to pay the costs (including enforcement costs) of governing them.

Now we can ask, where does political power come from? How is it typically collected, sustained and deployed? The answer will be that it collects around [political entrepreneurs](#) – individuals who seek to gather power to their own persons either to further some cause that is important to them, or to further their own careers and those of their close followers – and usually for both reasons together. This entrepreneur may found a new political movement or party, or may inherit his position at the head of an existing party. Or he or she may be elected by the members of an existing movement to a position of leadership. However it happens, the political entrepreneur, like the economic one, accepts the stresses and risks of leadership for some potential reward. He promises a share in that reward to his immediate circle of followers, and typically loses them when he does not deliver. In the bad old days, he usually lost his life at the same time.

The crucial point is that his power exists because it is attributed to him by followers and subjects – delegated *upward* (so to to speak), as a more-or-less voluntary grant of personal autonomy. That grant cannot be wholly coerced. It must attract enough voluntary support at the outset to win coerced support as needed. We need to ask how this can happen.

3.3.1 *The Concentration of Power*

Because of his age and his cunning, because of his gripe and his paw,/ In all that the law leaveth open, the word of the head wolf is law.

- Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*

Collective choice does not require a concentration of power. In fact, small groups are usually better off without it. Two people, or just a few people, can get along very well just by discussing some matter until consensus is reached, or else by by attributing informal leadership, on a casual, temporary basis, to whoever has an urgent stake, or relevant skill and knowledge, in the matter at hand. To reduce transaction costs, however, larger groups, and groups which must take decisions under time pressure will find some concentration of power unavoidable. Even committee meetings run more smoothly with a chairman. When consensual decision making⁶ is no longer practical, groups

⁶ As in a Quaker meeting, for example.

resort to majority voting – first by all eligible members, but then by supposed 'representatives,' whether elected or not. However constrained by arrangements for the '[separation of powers](#),' at the limit it becomes necessary to concentrate the bulk of a group's power in the hands of a single individual who takes and implements decisions on the group's behalf through a small circle of henchpersons and advisors. Long before this happens, they tend to organize (what we call) a [state](#), in which power gets concentrated, but also distributed and shared, through specific institutional arrangements which begin with some form of consultation and leadership.

To get a handle on the emergence of leadership in a simple group, and on the role of individual leaders once emerged, think of a band of hunters on the savannah, or amateur chefs preparing a dinner in someone's home. In both cases, each member of the group will be attentive and responsive to the progress of their task, and what the others are doing. In the absence of a leader, they will discuss or signal to each other, and thus organize their efforts spontaneously – in a casual, but quite effective manner. In both cases, however, the emergence of a leader will reduce transaction costs and increase the group's efficiency. Even if the leader issues no commands at all, merely does what everybody else is doing in exemplary fashion and as a focus of attention, there will be less uncertainty, and less to discuss; and the group task will go faster and more easily. For this reason, its members will tend to follow and obey such a leader of their own volition, and to impose sanctions on those who do not. With this natural authority (delegated *upward*, please notice, from the group's membership at large) the leader's suggestions may come to be enforced spontaneously, by a large subset of the membership, and at last professionally (when a rudimentary coercion/extraction cycle is in place⁷), on a pay-for-service basis by a cadre of soldiers, policemen, inquisitors and so forth.

Autonomy Or Concentration

In general, no one likes to be governed. We like to have power, and we like it when other people are constrained to our benefit while we ourselves are left free to do as we please. In consequence, the distribution of power is always an issue in itself, apart from any other interests in play. Thus, the power in a social system may be concentrated, or it may be left decentralized and shared. Almost always this is a matter of some contention, because there are advantages and drawbacks either way.

Centralization is desirable and to be expected when administrative uniformity is more important than adaptation to local conditions, and when prompt decision is more important than exhaustive discussion and buy-in. Its paradigm case is command on a battlefield where almost any quick decision is better than a delayed one. Conversely, local and personal autonomy are better when there is leisure to discuss and decide some matter, or when close coordination is either unnecessary or spontaneous. The paradigm here might be a

⁷ See Section 3.2.7.

band of primitive hunters, surrounding and swarming a large animal and killing it with their spears. At the climax of their hunt, their individual movements are better left unplanned because they all want the same outcome, and because each hunter's immediate situation will change too rapidly for worthwhile discussion, or for any signalling from a leader. To the question of autonomy or concentration of power, there can be no permanent, stable answer even for some particular group because neither extreme is ideal, and because the optimum will change from one situation to another. For this reason, corporations and other large organizations tend to go through cycles of centralization and decentralization, rarely satisfied with the existing [org chart](#) for very long.

There is another reason why distribution of power is a chronic issue for any group. For its relative autonomy and influence on others, its perks and its status, the leader's position is always coveted – not by everyone, usually, but by enough ['thymotic'](#) individuals who actually desire the extra labour, responsibility and danger that this position brings. Though a subordinate role has its advantages, (so that there are many who actively prefer it, do not seek promotion, and will turn it down when offered), there is never enough room at the top for everyone who would like to be there. And there is room for only one [monarch](#) or [CEO](#). The result is that familiar game of ['King of the Hill'](#) which children play on piles of snow, sand or gravel, and which adults play in politics and corporate boardrooms. This is a kind of thought process as we will see,⁸ if not a conspicuously rational one, insofar as it breaks the pre-existing uncertainty of possibilities. Still, it seems to be a necessary feature human sociality, and of our social existence.

The Coercion/Extraction Cycle

It is one thing to obey a law or follow a leader of your own free will. It's something else entirely to do so because you fear punishment if you don't. The great trick of formal government is get people to pay for the enforcement mechanisms that will be used against them – the army, the police force, the administrators and whatever other functionaries, who ensure that people do what they are told and pay their taxes *to be made to do it*. This trick is accomplished, as already mentioned, by setting up a [coercion/extraction cycle](#); but it is not easy. It's much simpler and cheaper to win a war and conquer a place than to collect revenue from it and govern – i.e. get it to pay for its own governance by your soldiers and administrators.

In connection with mindset and 'knitting together,' two main points are worth making about this cycle of revenue and payment. The first is that moderate, periodic exactions of revenue work better than harsh, haphazard exactions from time to time. As Colbert⁹ memorably explained, the art of taxation

8 In Section 3.3.4

9 [Jean-Baptiste Colbert](#), Minister of Finances to Louis XIV of France between 1665 and 1683.

is "like plucking a goose so as to obtain the most feathers for the least squawk." If you take a known percentage on a regular cycle, your 'geese' can plan for it, and get used to it. If you grab more, just when you feel like it, you provoke more resentment, more potential resistance, and you reduce what your 'goose' can give the next time. You set up a vicious circle, because any increase in revenue will require more (and more expensive) enforcement, which in turn will call for greater revenue.

For this same reason – to minimize resentment and resistance – a second point is that the extraction cycle should reduce and conceal the element of coercion as much as possible. By producing an advantageous assortment of public goods, and by cultivating identification of all subjects with their so called 'nation' (a semi-mythical entity) and its state, what starts out as a protection racket becomes legitimate government. In this way, a small army of [Norman adventurers](#) who invaded the British Isles with William the Conqueror in 1066 came to comprise the legitimate and much beloved monarchy of England by the time of Elizabeth I – whose subjects, mostly descended from the conquered Anglo Saxon peasantry of Harold Godwinson, were now proud Englishmen conquering Ireland and fighting off the Spanish. In thinking about collective minding and the deliberations of government, we should not forget the roots of that institution in organized violence and looting. The descendants of our Zuytdorp castaways were spared all this, but theirs is not the usual case.

Spreading the Discontent

When we complain about the inefficiencies of government – its reluctance to take decisions, or its slowness to get things done – we fail to understand one of its most important functions. Think of government not so much as the engine or power train of a car but as a kind of air bag or shock absorber. Though one of its key roles is to decide upon and organize the production of public goods,¹⁰ its main business is to contain and defuse the conflicts of the society by spreading the existing discontent as thinly as possible, pushing it *downward* so far as possible onto persons who lack the means to resist. When government is working well, that is its typical result: a fairly tranquil civil society, of people who may not like each other much, but still can tolerate each other and get along when they have to. When this air bag function breaks down, there can be civil war.

Faced with conflicting interests and demands for action in some area where it has no interest of its own, the first impulse of any government is to reject the problem, to deny that public intervention is necessary or justified, and insist that private persons should solve their own problems. A second impulse is to delay, appoint a series of commissions to study the matter in hopes that attention will turn somewhere else and that the clamour will go away. A third is to appease the demand for action with some inexpensive and meaningless gesture. Yet a fourth defence against real action is to arrange some com-

¹⁰ As will be discussed in the next chapter, in Section 4.1.1

promise which does not solve the problem and which satisfies no one, but which creates at least the illusion that something has been done. And a fifth may be to create some distracting crisis – to "fuck up, and call for national unity," as a friend has put it. War served nicely for this purpose before weapons became so lethal. It still does when it can be kept within limits, and fought by proxy somewhere else.

For emphasis, I am describing this air bag function much too cynically. In truth, a functional, responsible government does many things that are really life-furthering and useful to the society it serves. Still, it is important to see, [as Hobbes did](#), that the government's most vital contribution is not to do anything at all, but just to *be* there – to sit in the middle, take the pressure from all sides and keep the social temperature down. As pressures mount, this shock-absorber function is what keeps the group together, what keeps the [body politic](#) from shaking itself apart. The positive power to *do* things can mostly be left to entrepreneurs in the private sector – and, for the most part, it is so left by modern governments which strike contracts with corporations when they actually want something done. The crucial function of good government, time out of mind, has been to prevent harm from being done. Our central problem today is that in a high-tech world of massive, tightly integrated systems, buffering is no longer enough.

* * * * *

As with our Zuytdorp thought-experiment, the upshot is that bevvies are unstable. As a population grows, as its voluntary activities and exchanges grow more complex, a bevy tends spontaneously to develop into an organized, self-governing group. This will entail a concentration of power, a coercion/extraction cycle and a spreading of discontent. What [anarchists](#) tend to forget is that without political structure along these lines, it's hard to see how public goods could be agreed on and produced, how the minding and mindset of a large group could evolve and stabilize. The point is still contentious, it's hard to see how a complex economy can function well without a certain amount of regulation.

Our finding, then, is that power structures are needed to stabilize a complex social system and keep it functioning. But unfortunately, such structures are themselves unstable. Power has its own imitations, as we'll consider next.

3.3.2 The Limitations of Power

I never ruled Russia. Ten thousand clerks ruled Russia.
- Tsar Alexander on his deathbed.

Although [political power](#) is something more than 'strong influence,' it is rather less than the ability to have things your own way, or to make others do your bidding. Ideally, it accords with and focuses the collective intelligence, volition and capabilities of the group that it purports to lead. In practice, it is always limited in several ways by the conditions of its own existence, its situ-

ation and its exercise. Take that poor Tsar for example. In theory, he was autocrat of 'all the Russias,' as his title had it. In practice, his power was diminished not only by the limited obedience and capabilities of those 'ten thousand clerks,' but by the whole situation in which he exercised power, and by the far-from-absolute loyalty and obedience of nobles and commoners who acknowledged his power and bowed down to it.

- Like all rulers, he was constrained by the demands (however humbly presented) of his subjects. He was constrained by their hopes and expectations, and by his own fears that they might resist and evade his power, or even rebel against it, if the opportunity presented.
- He was constrained by the geography of his country, and by the economy and state system of which it was a part.
- He was constrained by his country's participation in the [European state system](#).
- He was constrained by the instruments of his power – his army and his bureaucrats – who would carry out his orders, or some version of them. In theory they were his servants; in practice, they invariably had some interests and intentions of their own.

For all these limitations, he was still the absolute sovereign whose word was law. In that sense, he we can say he was all-powerful, but only after we recognize the very real constraints on the commands that he could issue and on their practical consequences. He would always expect to pay some political price for issuing orders that his 'servants' were reluctant to follow, that provoked hostile responses from adversaries, or that produced adverse results for those of his people whose good-will, esteem and loyalty mattered to him. And the same would have to be said of such more recent figures as Hitler, Stalin and Chairman Mao. With their tremendous power, they could murder of millions of people, yet they could not accomplish their goals.

The great strength of democracy, apart from arranging for the relatively legitimate and orderly transfer of power, is its recognition and acceptance of these basic facts about the practical limitations of power, however absolute in theory.

The US provides a fascinating case study on the limitations of power because from the time of the revolution of the thirteen seaboard colonies against the British King and parliament, it has been suspicious and hostile to centralized power – even while seeing itself as a nascent world power with a '[Manifest Destiny](#)' (not to say, 'an imperial mission.')

This dilemma is [written into its constitution](#), and has bedevilled US politics ever since: How can you be a federal government for (originally 13, but now 50) semi-autonomous states, given a structure designed around Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers, which has difficulty gathering an authentic mandate for any national policy about anything? How can you function as a hegemonic power for the whole 'free world' when it is so difficult to make coherent policy for

your own country? There is no way in these pages to explore the dilemma as it deserves, but two points deserve mention due to their significance for this chapter on how groups knit themselves together:

- The first point is that power has steadily accrued to the Executive Branch since its Constitution of 1787 was ratified, despite all safeguards against such concentration.
- The second is that the 'freedom' which the US mindset appears to prize above all else turns out, in practice, to mean the freedom of large incorporated business firms to grow still larger.

The reader must draw their own conclusions.

3.3.3 The Working Dispensation

To hold itself together and function effectively, a group's political process must organize and maintain what is often called (and sold as) a '[working consensus](#).' The term is misleading, however, because what is organized and sold is often very far from true consensus in the dictionary's sense of that word – a "general agreement among the persons closely concerned." What usually gets organized is an arrangement in which the most powerful faction dominates and rules, while the others go along willynilly – more or less cheerfully or reluctantly, whether they like it or not. For that reason, it would be far more honest and accurate to speak of a 'working social arrangement,' or a 'working dispensation.'

For a paradigm case, consider the situation that prevailed in the British colonies of North America between the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the outbreak of civil war in 1861. Under their first attempt at self-governance (the Articles of Confederation), the 13 new states (with their populations of white free-persons and negro slaves) were barely strong enough (with the help of France) to fight off the British, and make good their revolution. The slaves, of course, were not consulted. Loyalists fled north to Canada. Women could not vote. With these exclusions, it was possible to claim that all persons were equal, with inalienable rights.

When a new constitution was ratified in 1788, the 13 loosely confederated states became one nation, now with strong centralizing tendencies which gradually became clear. The country doubled its size with the purchase of the whole Louisiana territory from Napoleon in 1803. Then, in 1812, it won (more precisely, it avoided losing) a small war with Britain which confirmed its independence and settled on a border with Canada. Next, through various actions against Spain and Mexico, it about doubled its size again, acquiring the land that is now Florida, Texas, California and the other south western states. It was clear that the US was a viable, and potentially very powerful entity. But there was a crisis brewing, and it took the [Civil War](#) to push the working 'consensus' somewhat further – at the price of conquering the South, and crushing it for a time.

What then do we mean by a '*working dispensation*? As my example shows, a group's dispensation may be pretty nasty and bloody to establish and maintain. It typically involves an inner circle of *players*, who compete to 'own' the group and run it for their purposes. These are [political entre-preneurs](#) who gather followers, contend for power and seek to move current law and policy in their preferred direction. We typically find one or more of these types at the head of every faction – every side of every issue – which currently perturbs a group's tranquility.

In a large group, these entrepreneurs have many followers. Under the power elite is a *ruling cadre* of organizers and senior managers and administrators who are not playing their own game, but playing hard, for remuneration and a share of power, in the game of someone else.

Beneath these again is a class of *indulged professionals* who sell their valuable skills, knowledge, reputation and whatever else to one or to another sub-group, or to the public at large. These individuals are workers, of course, but valuable ones who cannot be taken for granted because they are in short supply so that their time is of value. They probably have at least some personal capital to buffer against misfortune. They can do well for their children – giving them, at least, a decent start in life. They are not powerful as individuals, but can be very powerful as a class when they have strong common interests and can mobilize to achieve them. To varying degrees, we (*sic*) live very nicely, truth be told.

Beneath these comfortable professionals is a huge class of more-or-less *exploited workers* who are not nearly so well off. Men being horny and women fertile, they are always in plentiful supply and they need little education or training; today, they can often be replaced by machines, or by cheaper workers somewhere else. Though Marx and others have tried, they are difficult to organize on any scale that can win out against the other classes, or even hold much public attention.

Finally, at the very bottom of society is a class of *marginal persons*, unable or unwilling to compete for any secure role in society – not even for the privilege of being exploited. Books about various aspects of their situation are constantly being written, and I can add nothing here.

The founders of the US argued for a state based on the consent of "free and equal" citizens. What they actually built, and what we have in Canada, are states based on 'working dispensation' as I have just described it. In Canada, that dispensation still works moderately well. In many other places, it doesn't.

3.3.4 *Minding as a Power Struggle*

Coming up shortly, Chapter 4 will discuss politics as the thought process of a group, or of a whole society. As politics is basically a power struggle between contending individuals and factions, this idea requires some introduction: How can a power struggle be a thought process? We must go a little deeper into the concepts of minding and mindset, to perceive human thought itself as

a kind of internal power game in which competing suggestions contend to dominate and direct the system as a whole.

First, we should note that the very concept of group mind depends on an idea of collective power: A group is able (as a mere bevy is not) to develop and direct certain collective capabilities, usually concentrated in its various agencies and their incumbent personnel. Conversely, in a diverse population there can be no collective desires, beliefs, intentions and actions without a working dispensation – without sufficient power, in other words, to marginalize or suppress dissent, and thereby mobilize the group's components to some collective purpose.

Take imperial China as a historic example. Its [Great Wall](#) could not have been built without the power to overcome [resistance from the millions](#) who would have preferred to stay at home with their families; and that concentrated power is what we mean when we speak of the Qin dynasty, or the 'Chinese Empire.' Whether the Wall was a good idea, whether it represented a good use of the emperor's power, is a different question. The point is: Without that power, there would have been no minding entity called 'China.' The point holds on any scale, and is as much true of a family, a social club, a business firm or a modern nation as of the Chinese Empire. Even the smallest divergence of opinion will need to be overcome and set aside if the group is to function as such.

In minds of every type and size, any decision taken can be seen as a breaking of symmetry through a preponderance of suggestive power. Faced with a choice to make, the options which suggest themselves would (*prima facie*) be of equal weight, except that mindset makes one feel preferable to another. Against this background (or context) of mindset, some options are more attractive than others, or stand out more vividly; and these come to dominate the minding process until a choice is made. At this point, alternatives are put aside and marginalized, as the powers of the system are now to be aligned behind the option chosen.

In a human brain, this alignment process is explained through Gerald Edelman's theory of '[neural Darwinism](#),' which treats the brain's processing as a competition of rival neuronal firing patterns. For the emergence of 'working consensus' in human groups, some form of political power plays the crucial role. In law, business or politics there is a competition of options and/or negotiating positions. In a democratic election, the competition is for voter support. In the game of nations, the default competition may be open warfare, unless the violence can be contained or limited in some way. A preponderance of power by some governing faction or coalition is what breaks the symmetry and makes the system's choice.

One tragic limitation of human social life is that the choices of such a governing faction may cut against the needs and interests of its system as whole. Murderous [kleptocracy](#) is always a pleasant fantasy for some; and it is often a real possibility. (Hence the theory of [checks and balances](#).) At best, the

choices of the ruling incumbents will only approximate to their group's real needs, as they will feel, quite correctly, that they can do little good for anyone if they lose power.

We can define collective insanity as a situation in which the preferences of a ruling faction not only lead their social system to self-destructive policies, but lock the system into such policies and prevent them from being changed. In Chapter 6, on Collective Mindset, we'll review one hugely lethal example of collective insanity in some detail.

3.4 Solidarity and Decadence

After the fall of Moorish Seville to the Spanish [Reconquista](#) in 1248, a family of Berber extraction moved from Andalusia back to the region that is now Tunis, in North Africa. Several generations later, in the 14th century, this family produced a very great historian and thinker who is today regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, political science and economics. His full name would take a whole line to write, but he is remembered as [Ibn Khaldun](#), who may have been the first to formulate a theory of the cyclic rise and fall of civilizations,¹¹ based on the Arabic concept of '[asabiyyah](#),' which translates roughly as [solidarity](#).

Asabiyyah (or *solidarity*) is the collective trait which leads the members of a group to invest themselves – their time, attention, energy and, at the extreme, their lives – in that group's collective needs and interests and, above all, in one another. Groups with high solidarity work and fight as a coherent unit, like the four musketeers in the Dumas stories, with "[All for one and one for all!](#)" as their implicit motto. The members of such groups willingly accept costs and risks on the whole group's behalf, even when there are no direct benefits to themselves. Groups with low solidarity fall apart easily because their members go in different directions. Or they are easily defeated in combat or competition because their coordination is poor, with each member concerned first and chiefly to save their skin, cover their ass, and generally, look out for number one."

(Having mentioned Dumas' musketeers as a paradigm case of high solidarity, I can't resist a reference to "that easygoing paladin" [the Duke of Plaza Toro](#),¹² and also to Shakespeare's [Falstaff](#), at the other end of this spectrum.)

The solidarity of a group depends on its distributed cognition. It exists, typically, in groups under some threat or stress where everyone knows that their survival and welfare depend on everyone doing their job and pulling their weight; and where this is 'common knowledge' in the sense above: that everyone knows (and knows that everyone knows) that shirking, cowardice, or free-riding of any kind will be spontaneously punished by the group as a whole or by individual members to whose attention it comes. Solidarity exists, therefore, partly as a matter of individual self interest, because there is nothing

11 Resembling those of Toynbee, Spengler and Brooks Adams.

12 From Gilbert and Sullivan's [The Gondoliers](#).

to be gained and much to lose through attempted free-riding; but it exists as well, because attitudes and habits of solidarity prevail in the collective mind-set – as is likely under certain conditions. The group's survival and thriving are collective values. The dependence of these shared values on personal traits of courage, loyalty, respect for authority and mutual caring becomes common knowledge.

3.4.1 Falling Apart

There is a tendency for groups to lose such common knowledge as the threats which made for solidarity are removed. As this happens, the knights and nobles who were once defenders of the realm become entrenched as an aristocracy – a power elite. Centralization increases; the stake that common people feel in their society diminishes; the elites themselves turn their attention from power and wealth (the sinews of a civilization) to its arts and graces and luxuries. [John Adams](#), the second US president, explained as much in a famous letter to his wife Abigail:

"I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."

So understood, we see that decadence has much to be said for it.

Along these lines, as Ibn Khaldun may have been the first to notice, we see in history a Yin/Yang pattern of collective stress and success, but then of individual self-interest and eventual failure. Optimum stresses lead to success by prompting social solidarity, innovation and increased effort. Success, in turn, leads to ultimate failure through depletion of resources, with general cupidity, laziness and indifference to the well-being of others. When a group declines and collapses, the event which triggers this may be quite superficial – a threat that once would have been easily overcome. More fundamental than the disastrous trigger will be the loss of solidarity – of this group's collective capability to meet the threat in some united way.