Why are the Danes so individualistic?
The Neolithic Revolution and the rise of civilisations

Johan Fourie

Economics 281, 2021
Why are Danes so individualistic?

- Olsson and Paik (2016) argue that norms and values in current societies are, partly, a consequence of the Neolithic Revolution.
- In areas where agriculture was long established, the cultural norm of Obedience tend to persist.
- In areas where agriculture only arrived more ‘recently’, the cultural norm of Individualism tend to persist.
- The Danes are individualistic because they only ‘recently’ experienced the Neolithic Revolution.
Average time since Neolithic Revolution

Notes: The figure shows the geographical distribution of dates for average time since agricultural transition among 492 Western regions in our sample.
Notes: The figure shows a histogram and a fitted kernel density plot of the distribution of dates for average time since agricultural transition among 492 Western regions in our sample. The high frequency of regions making the transition after 7500 BP (5500 BCE) reflects the rapid diffusion of the Linear Bandkeramik culture (LBK), as described in text.
Theory of varying norm distribution

In northern periphery, the distribution of norms is strongly biased towards individualism (5500- BP)

The most individualistic groups in new lands repeatedly break up and establish new settlements northwards (9500-5500 BP)

Group of individualists leave core area and establish new settlements (9500 BP)
Relationship between Obedience and Control and time since Neolithic Revolution

Notes: The figures show the bivariate, unconditional correlations between dependent variables Obedience and Control and independent variable average time since agricultural transition for 43 Western countries. The point estimates for the underlying regressions are shown in Table 2, columns 1 and 5. The blue area around the curves display the 95-percent confidence intervals. Countries are indicated by three letter isocodes.
Relationship between Obedience and time, with controls

Notes: The figure shows the bivariate, unconditional correlation between dependent variable Obedience and independent variable average time since agricultural transition for 472 Western regions. The figure includes a fitted linear regression line as well as a fractional polynomial, non-linear curve. The point estimates for the linear regression is shown in Table 4, column 1. The blue and grey areas around the curves display the 95-percent confidence intervals.
What was the Neolithic Revolution?

- The wide-scale transition of many human cultures from a lifestyle of hunting and gathering to one of agriculture and settlement, allowing surplus production and larger populations.

- Two theories to explain the dawn of the Neolithic Revolution:
  - Climate change which resulted in:
    - the need to find alternative forms of food production, and/or
    - the spread of grasses (wheat and barley) that provided enough nutrients to allow hunter gatherers to settle
  - Religious festivals brought many hunter gatherer groups together. Here plants were domesticated over hundreds of years. Evidence from Turkey.
Map of domesticated plants and animals

Figure 7-1. This map shows the origins of the world’s food crops and domesticated animals. These plants and animals have been so widely redistributed, however, that today’s leading producers of many of these are not the same as the areas in which they were first domesticated.
What did the Neolithic Revolution do?

- Farmers are more productive than hunter-gatherers: they can produce a surplus and thus sustain a much larger population.
- They are also sedentary, meaning they can begin to accumulate capital.
  - They build more permanent housing (safety and comfort), and ‘invest’ in ‘capital’ such as irrigation, which makes them even more productive.
- Surpluses also allow specialisation: most people are farmers, but now also traders, builders, blacksmiths.
- But surpluses can also be stolen: protection becomes important, soldiers and city walls.
What did the Neolithic Revolution do?

- Larger populations and deeper specialisation also create more complex social hierarchies: the rise of religious and political leaders.
  - The equality of the hunter-gatherer disappeared.
  - Aside from the new threat to security, the new towns required a new way of social organising, a gap between those that work and those that manage began to develop.
- Not only societal inequality, but also inequality within the household.
  - Hunter-gatherers are feminists! The duty of finding food is shared between men and women.
  - After the Neolithic Revolution: role of women reduced to bearing children and taking care of them.
    - This was especially true in societies where the plough was used (Alesina et al. 2013). Why?
It was not that the Neolithic Revolution, as Olsson and Paik (2016) shows, only affected today’s norms.

Olsson and Paik (Olsson and Paik 2020) use an updated map of all Neolithic sites in Europe and correlate it to income levels today.

They find a robust negative relationship between the number of years since the Neolithic Revolution and income levels across and within countries.
Average time since Neolithic Revolution and income in 2005

(a) 64 Countries

(b) 257 Regions
In conclusion

- ‘We did not domesticate food. It domesticated us.’ - Yuval Noah Harari (2014).
- The Neolithic Revolution greatly narrowed the diversity of foods available, with a switch to agriculture which led to a downturn in human nutrition.
  - But let’s not romanticise hunter-gatherer communities: death rates due to violence was incredibly high.
- In the early agricultural villages of 10 000 years ago, the seeds of our own way of life were sown: economic specialisation, the possibility of private as opposed to or complementary to communal life; the opportunity to accumulate wealth in material objects; the opportunity to accumulate new techniques and tools and knowledge.
