

How we created an ultrasociety—six big questions answered

By Daniel Mullins
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Author: Daniel Mullins

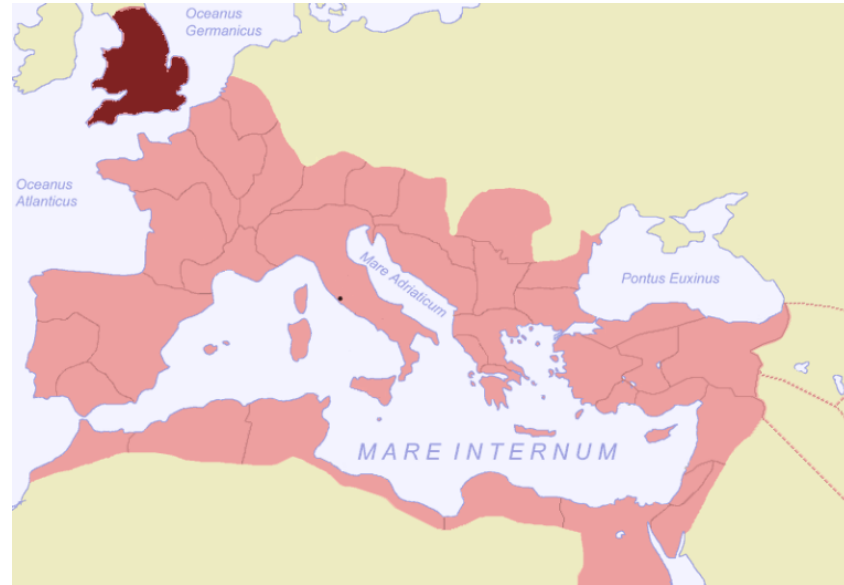


The U.S. Eastern Seaboard at night from the International Space Station.

Source: [Creative Commons](#)

Professor Turchin's *Ultrasociety* constructs a new theory to produce an explanatory account of human history. He explains why historical events (e.g., the fall of the Roman Empire) make sense given what we know about how and why humans cooperate and compete in groups. *Ultrasociety* tells us not only *what* occurred, but *why* these things happened in the first place, not the kind of historical trivia that I might use at dinner parties (‘You think your rent is sky high, let me tell you what poor families in imperial Rome’s insular had to put up

with!). For example, instead of detailing the decline and fall of the Roman Empire (as so many scholars have attempted to do), *Ultrasociety* takes a scientific approach to create a general theory of empires, answering questions like *Why did humans create empires in the first place?* and *How did empires stick together?* and *Why do they crumble so dramatically?* Not limited to a particular historical period, *Ultrasociety* hurdles through human history with an Olympic pace.



Roman Empire circa 96 CE. Source: [Creative Commons](#)

So, what's the big idea? What are some of the major questions and answers provided by this book?

Here are answers to six big questions in *Ultrasociety* in brief:

1. How did humans become the most cooperative species on the planet?

Culture drove genetic evolution during the emergence of our species. Culture and genes interacted to produce a very unique and highly cooperative species. This is known as 'gene-culture coevolution'. While ants are also very cooperative, they achieved this feat by spitting into thousands of species. All humans remain members of a single species.



Credit: (A. Iouguina, 2013). Social Innovation or Natural Coevolution? *FIELDS – An Interdisciplinary Design Journal*. Carleton University: Ottawa, ON.

2. How and why did human societies become so large and complex?

Competition and conflict between human groups – destructive creation – was the main engine that drove increases in group size and socio-political complexity. We cooperated to better compete.



Burning of rice residues in SE Punjab, India, prior to the wheat season. Source: [Creative Commons](#)

3. Is war modern?

No, our hunter-gatherer ancestors experienced incredibly high rates of violent death from warfare and other forms of homicide.



Bronze age swords provide archaeological evidence of ancient warfare. Source: [Creative Commons](#)

4. Can groups evolve and undergo a process of selection?

Yes, evidence from evolutionary biology, anthropology, and history all support the modern evolutionary theory of multilevel selection. For example, increasing competition within a group (e.g., pay inequality on a pro basketball team) significantly reduces performance.



Basketball teams with less pay inequality perform better. Source: [Creative Commons](#)

5. Can the natural and social sciences and the tools of the scientific method reveal the mechanics of history?

Yes, [Cliodynamics](#) and, in particular, *Seshat: the Global History Databank* has the potential to vastly improve our understanding of how human societies function, interact, and change.



Source: [Peter Turchin](#)

6. Can we make war obsolete? Or is this a pipe dream?

Given the horrendous tools of destruction available to us, humans *must* focus on the remarkable benefits of a millennia of cultural evolution – the incredible ability to cooperate in huge, diverse groups. Only by reaching new heights of cooperation will humans be able to overcome our own propensity for deadly between-group conflict.



3rd-century Roman soldiers battling barbarian troops on the Ludovisi Battle sarcophagus (250-260 CE). Source: [Creative Commons](#)

Ultrasociety tackles big questions with big history using common language and everyday examples. As a result, it is both authoritative and accessible, a difficult balancing act. Luckily, Turchin is leading the charge in the collection of just the sort of historical data necessary to test and refine our theories of history and cultural evolution. Turchin's goal is to expand our knowledge of cultural evolution by marshalling high-quality data to test key predictions and, as he writes in Chapter 10, *Seshat: the Global History Databank* is the cornerstone of this approach. Turchin should be applauded for putting his ideas and predictions into plain language, allowing them to be scrutinized, criticized, and refined by others. Ultimately, he seeks to transform what we know about human societies into a science. If we can develop a science of cultural evolution, he argues, then we can learn how to cure our social ills.

Ultrasociety is available on [Amazon.com](#)

Notes for Editors:

- For further information on *Ultrasociety* visit Peter Turchin's [website](#) or contact Jill Levine (jlevine@evolution-institute.org)
- Cite this page: "How we created an ultrasociety – six big questions answered." <http://seshatdatabank.info/the-six-big-questions-behind-ultrasociety>

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