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Review: After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination

By Kirkpatrick Sale

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Kirkpatrick Sale. *After Eden. The Evolution of Human Domination*. Durham: Duke University Press. 186 pp. ISBN: 0-8223-3938-2. (paperback; acid free paper). US\$19.95.

In the last decade, several books have come out trying to develop an overview of recent, archaeological, paleontological and historical anthropological evidence on human evolution. One of my favourites so far is John Reader's magnificent *Africa, A Biography of the Continent*. Although less broad in scope, Kirkpatrick Sale's *After Eden* now competes for first place. Like Reader, Sale provides a bird's eye view of recent global archaeological and paleontological findings and guides the reader in a mere 138 pages through 65.000 years of modern human evolution. Not being a palaeontologist or archaeologist but rather an interested social scientist, I am not in place to comment on Sale's use of the evidence, although the breadth of material he presents seems extensive. However, what sets *After Eden* apart from other similar works and what excites me as a social scientist, is Sale's social and critical emancipatory point of departure and the explicit lessons he tries to draw from the ancient past for the present.

The central argument of the book revolves around its subtitle: *The Evolution of Human Domination*. According to Sale, the "extraordinary dominance by one single bipedal species [...] has brought us to the present imperilment of the earth, including the extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems, the alteration of climate, the pollution of waters and soils, the exhaustion of fisheries, the elimination of forests, the spread of deserts, and the disruption of the atmosphere" (p.3). The consequence of this dominance of *Homo Sapiens* and its associated "reckless policies and practices towards the earth" is unavoidable *ecocide* (p.3). Our main predicament, so argues the book, is that human dominance is little recognised as a problem because the psychological processes leading up to it have been in the making for many millennia, so becoming "accepted wisdom" and even religion. In three main chapters, the book outlines how *Homo Sapiens* started innovating in hunting techniques (chapter one: 70.000 - 50.000 years ago), developed cultural and religious symbols to aid them in their survival (chapter two: 55.000 - 20.000 years ago) and intensified their land use through agriculture (chapter three: 20.000 - 5.000 years ago). Sale

carefully charts how each development triggered continuous "separation of self from nature," thereby increasing humans' impact on their environment "wherever they have gone" (p.36). In the fourth and final chapter, then, the less insidious lifestyle of *Homo Erectus*, *Homo Sapiens'* predecessor, is taken as an ancient example of how current human populations might become more modest, decrease their dominance over nature and so avoid ecocide.

No doubt, *After Eden* will create quite some controversy. As stated, this will partly revolve around the seven-mile steps the book takes in presenting evidence in archaeology and palaeontology. Most critique, however, will focus on its central message regarding human dominance and its subsequent conclusions regarding the evolution and invention of religion and the inevitable fall of modern capitalism. But this is to be expected of a book that penetrates and critiques modern status quo so deeply. For this reviewer, the central point of Sale's book is one that cannot be ignored and for once I completely agree with the advance praise given by Steven E. Churchill, Department of Biological Anthropology and Anatomy of Duke University, who is quoted on the back of the book: "seldom would I have the confidence to reach judgements from the evidence as boldly as does Sale, but I suspect that he is right in most of his conclusions."

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