



Title	Cooperation in adversity: a political theorist's response
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Publication date	2017-01
Publication information	Baker, John. "Cooperation in Adversity: A Political Theorist's Response." Taylor & Francis, January 2017. https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2017.1402257 .
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/9984
Publisher's statement	This is an electronic version of an article published in John Baker (2018) Cooperation in adversity: a political theorist's response, Global Discourse, 7:4, 599-601, DOI: 10.1080/23269995.2017.1402257
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1080/23269995.2017.1402257

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Cooperation in Adversity: A Political Theorist's Response

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This is an Author's Original Manuscript (AOM) of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Global Discourse* on 02 January 2018, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2017.1402257>

Baker, J. (2017) 'Cooperation in adversity: a political theorist's response', *Global Discourse*, 7:4, 599-601.

I found John Lazarus's 'Cooperation in Adversity' (2017) a very interesting read, and one that throws up many interesting questions. My response is very much in the spirit of a cross-disciplinary conversation, as the reactions of a political theorist to a natural scientist. I am therefore entirely open to the possibility that the issues I raise reflect a limited understanding.

The central work of Lazarus's paper is to propose a general account of the relationship between adversity, the benefits of cooperation, and the propensity to cooperate, in the organic world generally, and among human beings in particular. Lazarus proposes that for many species, including humans, the fitness or well-being (see below) of both cooperative and non-cooperative individuals within a given population varies with environmental quality in a sigmoid shape, with fitness or well-being generally rising as the quality of the environment improves, but unevenly. The gap between these two functions defines the net benefit of cooperation compared with non-cooperation. Lazarus argues that the relationship between net benefit and environmental quality has the shape of an inverted-U, i.e. that it is small under situations of both extreme adversity and high levels of environmental quality, but rises between them. In particular, he argues that we should expect the highest net benefit of cooperation to occur under conditions of relative adversity, and that this will be reflected in a higher propensity to cooperate than in either extremely adverse or relatively favourable environments. In this response, I reflect on some of the ways that political theory might complicate this picture.

The proposal made in the paper is summarized in its Figure 2. On that graph, the y axis represents the benefits of cooperation and non-cooperation, and the net benefit of one over the other. Lazarus notes that in evolutionary biology, benefit is conceptualized as Darwinian fitness (which is, in essence, successful reproduction), but that for application to human social interactions it is more appropriate to formulate the proposal in terms of well-being. Within political theory, however, one of the central premises of contemporary discussions is that people have many different conceptions of well-being. For each potential cooperator, then, the shape of the curves representing well-being that results from some possible form of cooperation or from not cooperating may be significantly different because of their different conceptions of well-being. To take an example from academia, some people seem to relish working as solitary scholars, while others get more satisfaction from working collaboratively with others; some value their teaching while others value their research. Thus, within a given environment, e.g. academics working in the same department, some people may have a strong incentive to cooperate in research while others have little or no such incentive. I don't think that this poses

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any problem in principle for Lazarus's central claims, but it does seem to make them more difficult to test empirically.

A similar issue arises for the x axis, representing the quality of the environment. In the non-human cases Lazarus considers, the quality of the environment is (for most purposes) the same for all individuals of the same species. But in the human cases he considers, the quality of the environment can only be defined relative to the particular aims of each individual. Thus, what counts as an adverse environment for the lone scholar who prioritises research will be different from what counts as adverse for the collaborator who values teaching. People's aims are, of course, shaped by the environment itself. An issue of particular interest to political theorists is the idea of 'adaptive preferences', i.e. preferences influenced by what people consider feasible within a given social environment. As a result, members of groups who are badly off in unequal societies typically adapt their preferences to their situation by aiming for outcomes that members of well-off groups may consider undesirable, like secure employment on an assembly line. Again, I don't think that this creates problems in principle for Lazarus's proposal, but it does seem to make testing it more challenging, since comparing the attitudes and behaviour of 'objectively' well-off people with those of objectively badly-off people may not capture the degree to which the individuals in question are located in more or less adverse environments *vis-à-vis* their actual aims. Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining the apparent anomaly Lazarus discusses about the greater willingness of well-off people to cooperate, because they may inhabit a more 'adverse' environment relative to their aspirations.

What is the environment, anyway? Does it include the cultural and institutional environment or not? It seems to me that the paper relates to this question at two levels. At one level, the analysis provides an explanation for why different human communities have evolved different norms and institutional arrangements of cooperation. The suggestion is that because these norms and institutional arrangements affect the probability of cooperation in circumstances that generate incentives to defect, they are more likely to be strongly cooperative in communities facing more (but not severely) adverse environments, e.g. in subordinate social groups. At a different level, norms and institutions are taken to be part of people's environments, and the analysis suggests that individuals are more likely to cooperate in the more adverse of these environments. So, within a given set of norms and institutions, we should expect relatively badly-off (but not severely deprived) individuals to be more disposed to cooperate than relatively well-off individuals.

What political theory inserts into this story is that, to put it in its mildest form, the norms and institutions of any *society* are strongly influenced by the interests of the privileged groups in that society. So although the considerations Lazarus discusses may generate a tendency for subordinate groups to evolve more cooperative norms, practices and behaviour than privileged groups, that tendency may be overridden by living in an environment that has been designed to suit the interests of the privileged. For example, the privileged may make it costly – even potentially lethal – for workers to cooperate through trade unions. Whereas they may make it very easy for capitalists to cooperate by forming cartels. Less overtly, it is in the interests of dominant groups to encourage norms of distrust and social division within subordinate groups. These dynamics could provide the basis for quite a different explanation for Lazarus's anomaly, though, again, one that does not undermine the general principles of his approach.

It is interesting in this respect that two of the sources cited in the paper (Haushofer 2013, 8; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 52-58) show that trust is higher in more equal societies. It seems implausible, and is contrary to Wilkinson and Pickett's other evidence, to suggest that equality creates a more adverse environment for human well-being. What seems more likely is that equality affects both the preferences of individuals and the norms and institutions of societies in ways that make cooperation more beneficial. In any case, these findings seem to warn against applying Lazarus's account in too simple a manner.

I could not conclude this response without commenting on the suggestion that human beings may possess ‘a universal sense of fairness’. The studies on cooperation that the paper reviews suggest that human beings may be predisposed towards fairness, though Lazarus is at pains to point out that this is not necessarily part of our genetic as distinct from our cultural endowment. The fact that, in a wide variety of settings, individuals seem disposed to act ‘fairly’ rather than in a purely self-interested way seems to provide evidence for this hypothesis. What political theory brings to this discussion is an acute understanding that there are many conceptions of fairness, both between and within societies. It may be a general feature of all of these conceptions that, under certain conditions (particularly those lacking any strong indications that anyone *deserves* anything), individuals are disposed to share rather than hoard resources. But if we don’t want to lose the run of ourselves, we should be very clear that this is a long way from believing that there is any one thing called fairness that is universally endorsed.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to John Lazarus for clarifying a number of issues as I developed this response.