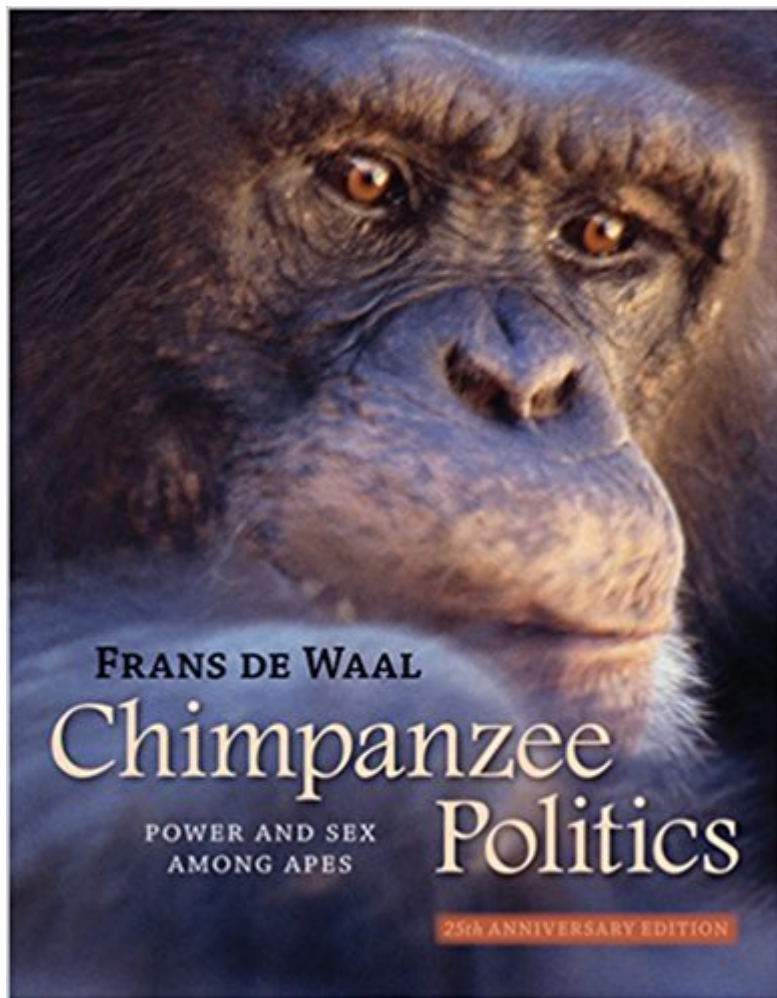




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Chimpanzee Politics: Power And Sex Among Apes



Synopsis

The first edition of Frans de Waal's *Chimpanzee Politics* was acclaimed not only by primatologists for its scientific achievement but also by politicians, business leaders, and social psychologists for its remarkable insights into the most basic human needs and behaviors. Twenty-five years later, this book is considered a classic. Featuring a new preface that includes recent insights from the author, this anniversary edition is a detailed and thoroughly engrossing account of rivalries and coalitions—actions governed by intelligence rather than instinct. As we watch the chimpanzees of Arnhem behave in ways we recognize from Machiavelli (and from the nightly news), de Waal reminds us again that the roots of politics are older than humanity.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The great apes, like humans, can recognize themselves in mirrors. They communicate by sound and gesture, form bands along what can only be called political lines, and sometimes engage in what is very clearly organized warfare. (Less frequently, too, they practice cannibalism.) In *Chimpanzee Politics* Frans de Waal, a longtime student of simian behavior, analyzes the behavior of a captive tribe of chimpanzees, comparing its actions with those of ape societies in the wild. What he finds is often not pleasant: chimps seem capable of astonishing deviousness and savagery, which has obvious implications for the behavior their human cousins sometimes exhibit. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"An excellent book... Just as fresh and thought-provoking in 2008 as it was in 1983." (Laelaps)

Found this book totally fascinating. It really is startling just how similar humankind is to our cousins the chimps. Since reading the book, I've had the unexpected side-effect of dealing far more gracefully with people. It's reinforced to me that much of people's default behavior is not intentionally malicious, but rather hard-wired into their nature. As other reviewers have mentioned, it will also change (in a very comical way) the way you view the apes than run our government.

I ordered this book after reading an online preview of the first forty-or-so pages and finding that it was a page-turner. The remainder of the book did not disappoint. This book primarily tells the story of the struggles for power between three male chimpanzees at a zoo in Arnhem over a period of about three years during the late 1970s, although the interactions between the members of this core group and the other members of the community of chimpanzees in which they lived (which numbered approximately twenty-five) are also given a great amount of attention. This is because, as the author explains, power relationships within a chimpanzee community are complex. The starkest example of this complexity is a diagram titled "Patterns of association" (p. 68), which shows the relative proportion of time that each adult chimpanzee spent with other individuals in the group. This diagram will be instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with complex systems theory, even if only in a cursory way. Underlying the story itself is its use by de Waal as a mechanism for examining social behaviours and needs in a more general sense. Although primarily a work of ethology, readers will also be able to see within this book echoes of the aforementioned systems theory as well as anthropology, psychology, historiography and, above all, political science. Perhaps it is a combination of the resulting versatility and the general accessibility of the prose that has made this book a "classic" worth reprinting a quarter of a century after its initial publication. Furthermore, as de Waal states in the preface (which was written for the 25th anniversary edition), he has deliberately avoided making comparisons between human society and behaviour on one hand, and those of the chimpanzees under observation on the other, beyond the use of terms such as "politics", "coalition formation" and "strategy", which tend to have very human connotations for most readers. This dearth of inter-species comparison has served to both make the book a timeless one and, more importantly, to leave the ultimate act of comparative interpretation open to the reader. In addition to a preface and epilogue added to this 25th

anniversary edition, the book is structured in seven parts. The first is a lengthy introduction, which focuses on primate behaviour in general, including details of the meaning of chimpanzee body language and expressions. Five chapters then respectively introduce the individual chimpanzees; describe aspects of the power struggle between the three senior males; analyse the nuances of chimpanzee leadership in a social context; discuss the relationship between sexual privileges and the society's power structure; and analyse the broader social mechanisms at play and their significance. Finally, a brief conclusion summarises the core behavioural patterns the chimpanzees displayed. That these behaviours could be considered political is unquestionable (de Waal uses Laswell's definition of politics as 'who gets what, when and how' (p. 1)); the process of alliance formation, breaking and re-formation that the apes undertook will be familiar to anyone who has studied human politics. Although the Machiavellian nature of the behaviour of adult male chimpanzees under observation has often been highlighted, and is certainly evident, for me two other aspects of the discussion were much more interesting. The first of these was that the alpha male relied on the consent of all other members of the community, not just the other males, for his legitimacy. The second is that this legitimacy was related to redistributive (primarily regarding food) and arbitral (between subordinate chimpanzees) functions performed by the alpha male. The better the alpha male was at these functions, the more consent he received from the group. As de Waal demonstrates, straightforward comparisons of outright physical strength matter less in determining the success of an alpha male than both coalition forming between males and legitimacy in the eyes of the community as a whole. In the power struggles that de Waal chronicles every chimpanzee's attitudes and behaviours mattered, it was only the relative extent to which they did that differed. This reliance of the powerful upon the consent of their subordinates is a point that many commentators seem to have missed. Where the analysis in this book wears thin is regarding the motives underlying why each of the three males involved in the power struggles chronicled sought power in the first place. De Waal offers biological imperatives as the core explanation underlying the drive for power, showing that the alpha male tends to mate more often and therefore has a greater chance of fathering offspring. This biological imperative, he notes, is likely to be unconscious. Chimpanzee males are therefore motivated instead by 'subgoals' such as an innate desire for high rank and to maximise one's own rate of copulation (pp. 162-8). This conclusion is tentative at best because it is a deduction based on de Waal's observations of chimpanzee behaviour. Without being able to

“get inside the chimpanzee’s head”, however, there is little more than this that de Waal could have done. As things stand, therefore, his conclusion is tentative but it is nevertheless the “best fit” for the evidence at hand. This is a compelling book that has not lost any of its relevance over time. On one hand it is a good introduction to ethology for people unfamiliar with this topic. On the other hand, it will also be useful to readers across a variety of other disciplines, who will benefit from the indirect insights this book offers into the more primal urges and needs of our own species.

Haunting. Provocative. Endearing. I have read *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* by Carl Sagan but despite Sagan’s prose it lacks the intimacy of *Chimp Politics*. The power struggles between the dominant chimps is just as tragic and informative as any play by Shakespeare.

If you sometimes wish that human beings would just put away their political infighting, making and breaking of coalitions and alliances, back-biting if not back-stabbing, lying, and all the other shenanigans that give politics such a bad name, and if you see it as all the more shameful because you think that only humans do it, well, think again! For too long we have perhaps thought that such antics might just be a case of “Monkey see, monkey do,” that our simian cousins engaged in such antics merely in imitation of us humans. But here we have the utterly engaging report on several years of careful expert observation--with absolutely minimal opportunity of imitating humans--of our closest relatives in the animal world, a report which so reveals the many and varied subtle ploys of chimpanzees old and young, male and female, strong (much stronger than humans) and relatively weak, that it has been suggested that a copy of this book—*Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among Apes*—be given to every freshman congressman to read carefully, if only to avoid being eaten alive by colleagues more practiced and skillful in the political arts than he or she may be! To change the metaphor, to watch these chimpanzees is perhaps all too much like looking in a mirror. But if you can stand the view, it may someday save your life.

Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among Apes was a very disturbing book to read. Perhaps this is because of the way Franz de Waal chose to end the book. The story about how Luit finished his reign as “alpha male” was extremely upsetting. One of the key themes in the book is that so called political behavior is rooted at a level of development that is below cognitive and is as much instinctive as it is learned. Learning about the male chimpanzee’s quest for dominance, it makes one wonder how much our behavior is motivated by inherent drives that are not only irrelevant in

modern cultures, but are unknowable by those who experience the motivation. This book has changed the way I look at and understand the world around me. I strongly recommend this book, but it is not for the faint-hearted.

de Waal gives wonderful insight into the world of chimpanzees and their social structure. The work was not only useful as an anthropology student, but also applies to human social structures.

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