



# Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes

*Frans de Waal*

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## **Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes** Frans de Waal

In this revised edition, de Waal expands and updates his story of the Arnhem colony of chimpanzees. De Waal reminds readers through his account of the chimps' sexual rivalries and coalitions, and intelligent rather than instinctual actions, that the roots of politics are older than humanity.

## **Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes Details**

Date : Published April 10th 2000 by Johns Hopkins University Press (first published 1982)

ISBN : 9780801863363

Author : Frans de Waal

Format : Paperback 235 pages

Genre : Science, Nonfiction, Psychology, Politics, Biology, Animals, Anthropology

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## Graham says

Chimpanzee Politics is a narrative about the social interactions of a group of chimpanzees in a Dutch zoo monitored by primatologist Frans De Waal in the late 70s. Although chimpanzees have no verbal language, their social interactions are very complex. The majority of the book focuses on the dynamics of how alliances are forged and broken. Many of the males strive to become the alpha male, however this is not a feat that is possible without support, including the females, as even a very strong male cannot win a fight against a band of adversaries. The alpha male is in charge of keeping the peace in the group, and additionally chooses which males are allowed to mate with which females. Consequently, the lower males commonly will sneak sexual encounters with forbidden females. For example lower males will hide their erections from higher males, and females learn to keep quiet when mating with lower males. Peace is broken when a male attempts to take the throne until he succeeds or admits defeat. Peace resumes when relationships are healed between males which is often brokered by the females. Chimpanzees exhibit many social behaviors in common with humans including deceit, retaliation (often delayed until a good opportunity arises), reciprocity, and coalition building. In short, it is clear that chimpanzees possess many of the precursors and fundamentals of human social interaction.

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## Caroline says

This book is such an amazing classic. If you want to know about primate behavior Frans de Waal from Emory and the Yerkes Primate Center is the ultimate authority! A lot of his students and other scientists frequently work with us. At any rate, this guy has done nothing but live and breathe primates his entire life and WOW did he get this thing started! I don't even adhere to the normal rules of people primate society anymore....once you work with Chimps its Chimpanzee Politics man.....that's all there is and it exists with us as well! If you want to know about social structure and behavior this is the BIBLE in the field!

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## James Specht says

One of the best books I've read in months. Its very scientific and informative without being dry and too academic. I enjoyed the book on that level of curiosity about how similar we are to apes on how some so called "Human" traits are older than humans themselves. To be honest, the real reason I enjoyed this book is how like a Soap Opera it is... I got totally wrapped up in the stories of power struggles between the Alpha Males of the group and the dynasty powerful female chimps. Utterly fascinating stuff.

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## Kiril Valchev says

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## Scriptor Ignotus says

This book was recommended reading by an old college professor of mine; a politics professor. I never had a course with him in which he used this book, but he referred to it all the time, eliciting my interest as well as attracting the derision of other faculty members, who referred disparagingly to his love of "the chimp book." I've been out of college for a while now, but when I saw a copy in the library I knew it was finally time.

Chimpanzees are considered by many to be the species closest to mankind in terms of psychology, personality, and social structure, and the observations of this book make it easy to see why. Like humans, chimps have distinctive and very noticeable personalities which are often distinguished by their facial features. Like humans, they are social and status-conscious. Perhaps most importantly, chimps more than any other animal besides humans have a need and a capacity for both group solidarity *and* for the constant management and alteration of power relations within the local community, making them capable both of fierce conflict amongst themselves as well as of keeping close ranks in the face of outside threats. Much to the chagrin of hippies and feminists, who wish that our society was more like that of the bonobos, who lean towards matriarchy and resolve most of their conflicts with sex, we seem to be far more related to the alpha-male-dominated, war fighting clans of the chimpanzee, with whom we share a common evolutionary ancestry. As de Waal states, Aristotle had no idea how correct he was when he said that man is a political animal.

The book is an account of the social interactions De Waal and his team observed among a preserve of chimps at Arnhem during the 1970s. The centerpiece of the narrative, and the source of its most memorable moments, detail the power struggle between the three leading males of the group: Yeroen, Luit, and Nikkie, each of whom spends time being on both the top of the hierarchy and lower down the chain. As with human beings, chimpanzee societies are not strictly hierarchical; each member of a group exerts some level of power and influence, and as each of the leading males found out, brute force is not enough to maintain leadership. Chimps, like humans, form coalitions to overcome stronger opponents, and each successive change of leadership occurs because one of the rising male chimps forms relationships of cooperation or intimidation with the other members of the group (particularly the females), gradually leaving the alpha male isolated. For instance, Luit gains power over Yeroen, the original alpha male, in part by harassing and intimidating the females of the group whenever he sees them cooperating with Yeroen.

A good portion of the book talks about sexual relations among the chimps through the prism of power relations, as chimp sexuality is usually bound up with power and status (unlike with humans, of course). Some of the male-female interactions de Waal relates reminded me amusingly of old cartoons from the 1950s. Female chimps, for instance, will sometimes instigate a male chimp into attacking another female with whom she currently has a quarrel. She will do this by going over to the male chimp and behaving very affectionately towards him (chimps kiss each other much as humans do), while motioning in the direction of the offending female and screaming or hooting at her. When the male chimp goes to put a beatdown on the other female, the instigating female will sit back and watch. Women.

As Frans de Waal says in his conclusion, politics is older than humanity.

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## Juliusz Gonera says

Chimp social organisation is much more intricate than you think.

Memorable quotes:

"Nikkie is the highest-ranking ape but he is completely dependent on Yeoren.

Luit is individually the most powerful. But when it comes to who can push others aside, then Mama is the boss"

"[...] this would suggest that reciprocity among chimpanzees is governed by the same sense of moral rightness and justice as it is among humans"

"When Aristotle referred to man as a political animal he could not know just how near the mark he was. Our political activity seems to be a part of an evolutionary heritage we share with our close relatives."

"If we broadly define politics as social manipulation to secure and maintain influential positions, then politics involves every one of us."

"To compare humans with chimpanzees can be taken to be just as insulting, or perhaps even more so, because human motives seem to become more animal as a result"

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### **rachelm says**

Fascinating narrative about social interactions and power struggles in a chimpanzee colony in a Dutch zoo.

This book is at its strongest when chronicling events dispassionately and allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions about analogues to human behavior, and weaker when the author draws heavy handed explicit comparisons and ventures into sociological studies on human gender and hierarchy. The author references Machiavelli several times, and I think this book is well read in conjunction with "The Prince."

Well worth a read for those interested in biological explanations of human nature.

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### **Joe Iacovino says**

This was a great look at a chimpanzee life. De Waal notes that obviously there will be some differences in the wild versus his observations of the chimp colony at Arnhem, but the vast majority will be similar. This is an informative and enthralling look at chimp life (and none to subtly our own) among the leaders and absolutely delivers on the title with no deviation from the topic. This edition includes a heartbreaking epilogue and I highly recommend it. Simply an outstanding treatment and good observational science. Nice work.

Note: The only reason it took me so long to finish was due to my schedule lately. The book itself is an easy, enjoyable read.

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### **Steven Peterson says**

This is a revised version of Frans de Waal's widely read work "Chimpanzee Politics." At the outset, de Waal notes that he uses the term "politics" very consciously. He says: "If we follow Harold Lasswell's famous

definition of politics as a social process determining 'who gets what, when, how,' there can be little doubt that chimpanzees engage in it. The events depicted in this volume come from the Arnhem Zoo chimpanzee colony. That itself is problematic, since chimpanzees (and other animals) in artificial environments can have their behavior altered thereby (still, similar things have happened in "the wild," so de Waal's work is probably of value and relevance).

One of the threads of this work is the ongoing triangular relationship among three adult males--Luit, Yeroen, and Nikkie. The record of their shifting alliances and the gruesome murder of one of these three later on makes telling and chilling reading.

The arc of the trio's relationship begins with Yeroen as the dominant (alpha) male. Over time, Luit began to ally with Nikkie to undermine Yeroen's authority. Finally, the coalition of Luit and Nikkie prevailed and Yeroen was dislodged as the top male in the troop. However, with time, Yeroen and Nikkie began to explore an alliance and, in the end, the two united to "overthrow" Luit, with a ghastly ending.

There is much more to this book than the slow dance among the three males, but that tale typifies the calculated behavior of chimpanzees. This is a well written and even compelling read. The problems with the artificial setting and de Waal's treatment of the chimpanzees as cost-benefit calculators may give them too-human qualities. But the arc of this book is fascinating and still worth reading years after the first version was published.

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## **David Olmsted says**

This book covers the introduction of a chimpanzee colony into a large Arnhem zoo habitat during the late 1970's. Because the zoo provides food and a safe territory it is not natural environment but it allows for close observations of internal group dynamics. The core of the colony are the females with their offspring who above all seek stable peaceful internal group dynamics along with good food and secure territory. Chimps (but like humans and baboons) are unique among the great apes in that the males work together to achieve this territory control yet this cooperation is balanced by their competition for the females. This competition is the main story of this book and it is more political instead of violent relying on coalitions between two males or between a male and a larger group of females. Consequently extensive social conventions are used in this process. The potential for extreme violence is there but it is rarely expressed although an example is given at the end of the book.

The females favor those males who can keep the peace between them by threat of force even though that force is never expressed strongly by biting as it is with other males. This also seems to explain why up and coming mid-ranking males harass the females until the females show them respect. The way females keep the peace between males is by more sympathetic and more socially aware interaction. When a coalition of two males dominate the sexual privilege hierarchy they share access to the females although the females typically have ideas of their own and will sneak away with others when they can. Yet even the most dominant males are very tolerant of children and females and will even let females steal food out of their hands without a fuss. This book make a great comparison piece to another book by the same author on the similar sized Bonobo whose males do not cooperate for territoriality.

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## **David says**

Interesting book. The more scientifically-inclined should note this is more like an anthropologist's report on observing a remote culture than a popular science description of the collective results of scientific studies.

In order to get a better idea of chimp group behavior than is possible with small numbers of chimps in zoos or living in people's home, they wanted to watch a sizable group. It's difficult to see all the interactions that occur in the wild. So, they put a group in a large enclosure. However, the group was not taken as a whole from one place, and was originally all female until they added a few adult males. To make observations easier, the enclosure had fewer trees and such than in nature that would limit viewing. So, this book is based on an artificial setting and group, and is not even an overview of multiple artificial settings and groups.

As a result, the book is an important starting point for understanding chimps, but should not be treated as the best and fullest scientific understanding we can achieve. The book came out a good number of years ago, so it's possible that other books have come out which are based on a broader review of chimp groups.

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### **Stephen says**

Back in the 1970s, primatologist Frans de Waal conducted one of the first extensive studies into the social structures of chimpanzees. Chimpanzee Politics is the result, establishing facts now taken for granted, namely that chimpanzee populations are organized by rank, which for males influences how successful they are at spreading their genes. It also illustrates their startling intelligence, both social and physical; de Waal witnessed chimpanzees collaborating to overcome obstacles, like electrified wire wrapped around the base of a tree that could provide a bounty of food in leaves, as well as engaging in Machiavelli-level manipulation to increase their status within the community. Admittedly, some of this is subjective, but only some, and de Waal's ideas were confirmed by other researchers' observations of different populations, like Jane Goodall's Gombe Valley project. Chimpanzee Politics makes for fascinating reading if you've an interest in our fellow primates: de Waal's work indicates that leadership, even in a sheltered environment like the zoo enclosure in Arnhem where he did his work -- comes with responsibilities, like keeping order. Alpha males haven't simply brute-forced their way into the top of the sexing order; they're seemingly expected to protect the weak against the strong and settle disputes. de Waal also points out that leadership in a chimpanzee tribe isn't limited to brute force: he demonstrates how an older, deposed chimpanzee was able to maintain a position of immense influence by continuing playing two young contenders for the seat of power off of one another. It's rather like a game of Survivor, with less whining and more fur -- and instead of being voted off, you get beaten senseless. de Waal's study did have its limitations: the chimpanzees did not interact with other tribes, nor did they compete for food, so important aspects of the equation are missing. He did compare his experiences with those of Goodall's, however, and his general conclusions aren't at odds with those she reached in *Through a Mirror*

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### **Justin Heyes-jones says**

"If we look straight and deep into a chimpanzee's eyes, an intelligent, self-assured personality looks back at us."

The author, Frans de Waal, is a primatologist who for several years studied a colony of chimps in Arnhem zoo. Although studying them out of the wild like this is not an entirely natural setting, the zoo visitors are kept well back, and the chimps have been found to act very much like they do in the wild in most respects. In addition the setting allows them to be watched close up without danger.

We get introduced to the key players in the chimps community and feel like we are getting to know real individuals. Then the author covers their behaviour in detail. Factual but never boring or superficial.

### Intelligence

Chimps behave with surprising intelligence. In the book they make several elaborate escape attempts, some successful, that require planning and co-operation.

In other chapter an ape demonstrates that lying does not require human language. Using body language alone a chimp is described acting like he does not know where some food is hidden when with the group, but later alone he runs straight for it.

Also discussed is the social intelligence hypothesis. That intelligence evolved in order to deal with increasingly complex group life of the apes. The technical inventiveness that chimps have in limited degree and humans have, is a secondary development to the need to outsmart others, detect deceptive tactics and so on. Is it therefore reasonable to suppose that humans had centralized social organization before they had material possessions with which to display their wealth and power?

### Leadership

Even in the zoo colony the chimps occupied themselves with leadership battles. Chimps want to lead their colonies as the leader gets his pick of females to mate with, and is able to keep his children safe. However in order to become the leader in the first place there is months of not just physical intimidation, but political gesturing and favour giving to win support of the females and other apes in the group.

The author mentions the French phrase "Noblesse Oblige", which means that with wealth power and prestige come responsibilities. In order to keep their position at the top of the hierarchy, chimp leaders will need to help weaker chimps in disputes, keep the peace, act for justice and share the females in the group.

The way the chimps behave in the colony is really not very far removed from the way managers and executives behave in a large company in some respects!

### Avoid the epilogue

Originally the book was published in 1982. I picked up a revised edition 1998 with an additional introduction and epilogue, and some edits to reflect updated theories. I recommend skipping the epilogue if you want a happy ending, because you grow attached to the individual apes and there is bad news for a couple of them that was only added in the 1998 printing once the author had time to come to terms with what happened.

In all I think it's a fascinating book, and anyone interested in where we came from should check it out. In addition it seems to be recommended reading for senators and business leaders. Hopefully my boss will not read this and groom me at work before attacking one of the other managers.

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### Artur Olczyk says

*Chimpanzee Politics* by Frans de Waal is an attempt to provide a valid overview of what the author believes can be coined as **politics** among our closest genetic relatives, the chimpanzees. He does an excellent job, mostly.

By following a popular definition of politics, he describes it as a social process determining *who gets what, when, and how*, and further says that

there can be little doubt that chimpanzees engage in it.

Subsequent chapters describe a chimpanzee colony in the Arnhem Zoo, the Netherlands, and its relation to social interactions, such as reciprocity and strategic intelligence.

Reader's main concern is raised early in the book, with the author's parallel between his study and island biogeography. De Waal rightly points out that the relative simplicity of islands has allowed naturalists, such as Darwin, to develop ideas applicable to more complex systems. He then concludes, though, that since

the chimpanzee island at the Arnhem Zoo housed a limited number of chimpanzees [just like a real island], under simplified conditions,

the principles he presents in his case-study apply to apes on an island and apes in the zoo.

The author does not seem to acknowledge that those **simplified conditions** in the said environments can, and most probably do, derive from non-identical conditions. For wild apes, they can be advantageous just as much as potentially lethal (e.g. weather-relative factors, like abundance or scarcity of food), whereas the apes in the zoo do not have to face negative consequences of their surrounding. In a footnote, the author evokes further parallels drawn by another primatologist, Christopher Boehm. Yet, he somehow fails to mention that Boehm points out to factors - non-existent in a zoo - that can potentially breach social structure of wild apes, such as inter-group conflicts that, for instance, put pressure on adult males and make them evidently more aggressive towards infants (vide: *Hierarchy in the Forest*). He admits that superficial conditions were applied to study the Arnhem colony:

In Arnhem the problem of competition for food has been effectively solved by two measures. First, the public are kept away from the animals so that they cannot feed them. Second, the apes are split up every evening into small groups and fed in the cages where they sleep [in order to alleviate the aggression among the chimpanzees].

If anything, the Arnhem zoo is more like a haven than a recreation of natural environment.

Nevertheless, Frans de Waal's study is exemplary in describing intra-group behavioural patterns and their interdependency. He brilliantly shows how important formalized ranks among chimpanzees are and what influences them. When the ranks become unclear, a dominance struggle ensues. Chimpanzees, just like humans, form coalitions (vide: *Sociobiology*) in order to gain power. There is a very interesting example of such a coalition between three adult males ('the triumvirate') that showcases a striking similarity to human coalitions.

Moreover, the book tackles issues such as the importance of stability and balance among the chimpanzees in the group. The human economic system, with its reciprocal transactions and centralization, is recognizable among our distant cousins, too (they exchange social favours rather than gifts). Also, chimpanzees can rationalize strategies and engage in games of social manipulations to achieve their goals, for instance, by sexual intercourse.

The biggest advantage of this book is its personal character. De Waal provides multiple examples and anecdotes, such as the Big Escape. Despite the warnings from the zoo officials, several large branches were left lying around on the ape's island. Apparently, the chimpanzees placed branches against a wall and scaled the wall. Some of them visited a restaurant that day and ate oranges and bananas.

