

REVISED EDITION

with photographs and drawings by the author

Power and Sex among Apes

POLITICS

Frans de Waal

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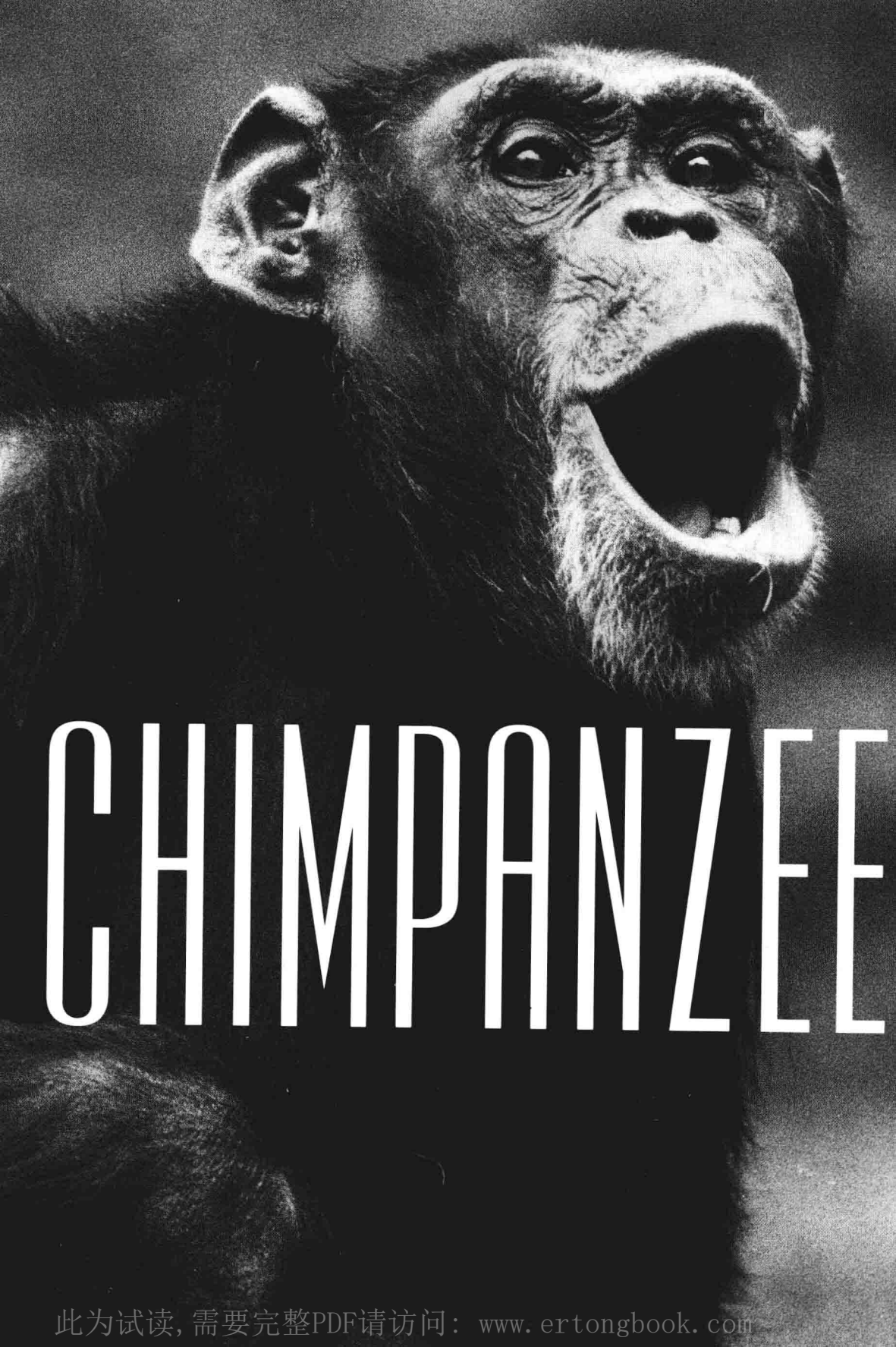
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CHIMPANZEE POLITICS



CHIMPANZEE

For Jan van Hooff

I put for a generall inclination of all mankind,
a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power,
that ceaseth onely in Death.

THOMAS HOBBS, 1651

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

WHEN I WROTE *CHIMPANZEE POLITICS*, IN 1979 AND 1980, I WAS A beginning scientist, in my early thirties, without much to lose. At least, that's the way I looked at it at the time. I didn't mind following my intuitions and convictions, however controversial these might be. Keep in mind that this was a time at which the words *animal* and *cognition* could barely be mentioned in the same sentence without raising eyebrows. Most of my colleagues shied away from the suggestion of intentions and emotions in animals for fear of being accused of anthropomorphism. Not that they necessarily denied animals an inner life, but they followed the behaviorist dogma that, since what animals think and feel is unknowable, there is no point in talking about it. I still remember standing for hours on the metal grid over the smelly night quarters of the chimpanzees, holding the only phone in the building to my ear, talking with my professor, Jan van Hooft, who, though always supportive, was also quite a bit more cautious than I, trying to convince him of yet another wild speculation. It is during these discussions that Jan and I, at first jokingly, began referring to developments in the colony as "politics."

The other major influence on this book was the general public. For years, I addressed organized groups of zoo visitors, including lawyers, housewives, university students, psychotherapists, police academies, bird-watchers, and so on. There is no better sounding-board for a would-be popularizer. The visitors would yawn at some of the hottest academic issues, but react with recognition and fascination to basic chimpanzee psychology that I had begun to take for granted.

I learned that the only way to tell my story was to bring the chimpanzee personalities to life and to pay attention to actual events rather than the abstractions that scientists are so fond of. I benefited greatly from a previous experience. Before I came to Arnhem, I had done a dissertation project at the University of Utrecht. In one of my monkey groups, the males had changed ranks, resulting in my very first scientific paper, published in 1975, entitled: *The wounded leader: A spontaneous temporary change in the structure of agonistic relations among captive Java-monkeys*. In putting this report together, I had noticed how utterly useless the cus-



My eyes were not the only ones riveted on the drama in the colony: the apes, themselves, kept a close watch as well. A few of them look on while Nikkie (background, left) is waking up Yeroen with an intimidation display.

tomary formalized records of ethologists are when it comes to social drama and intrigue. Our standard data collection aims at categorizations that serve the counting of events. Computer programs sort through the data, creating neat summaries of aggressive incidents, grooming bouts, or whatever behavior we are interested in.

Items that cannot be quantified and graphed run the risk of being tossed aside as mere “anecdotes.” Anecdotes are unique events from which it is hard to generalize. But does this justify the contempt in which some scientists hold them? Let’s consider a human example:

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein describe in *The Final Days* Richard Nixon's reaction to his loss of power: "Between sobs, Nixon was plaintive. . . . How had a simple burglary done all this? . . . (He) got down on his knees . . . leaned over and struck his fist on the carpet, crying aloud, 'What have I done? What has happened?'"

Nixon was the first and only U.S. president to resign, so this really can't be much else than an anecdote. But does this diminish the observation's significance? I must admit to a great weakness for rare and peculiar events. As we shall see, one of my chimpanzees had tantrums similar to Nixon's (minus the words) under similar conditions. I learned from my earlier study that in order to analyze and understand such events one needs a diary that conveys how things unfolded, how each individual got involved, and what was special about a situation compared to previous ones. Instead of merely counting up and averaging chimpanzee behavior, I was intent on injecting historiography into my project.

Thus, upon arrival in Arnhem I opened a diary. Since little happened initially, I filled it with notes about personalities and behavior patterns that struck me as unusual. As a result, however, I was getting into a chronicling mode, sensitive to shifting social relationships, ready for the political drama that was to come. When at last it did explode, I filled page after page with impressions, predictions, corrections of earlier impressions, but most of all the bare facts. Fascinated and emotionally engaged, I spent day-in-day-out and thousands of hours on a wooden stool overlooking the island, intent on producing the most detailed record ever of a power struggle, human or nonhuman. It is only in sifting through my copious notes, years later, that the connections between various events fell into place, and *Chimpanzee Politics* began to take shape.

The book caused little controversy when it first appeared, in 1982, with the publishing house of Jonathan Cape, in London. In both popular and academic reviews it was welcomed rather than attacked. In hindsight, this is understandable as its underlying premise perfectly fit the *Zeitgeist* of the 1980s in which attitudes toward animals were rapidly changing. Having worked largely in isolation from the emergence of cognitive psychology in America, I had not realized that I had not been alone in the exploration of this new intellectual territory. This circumstance illustrates how scientific developments in different corners of the world are often connected by thin threads of shared ideas. They are

never totally independent. Thus, Donald Griffin's *The Question of Animal Awareness* did not surprise me when I first read it, just as *Chimpanzee Politics* evidently did not surprise most primatologists.

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Preface

If we follow Harold Laswell's famous definition of politics as a social process determining "who gets what, when, and how," there can be little doubt that chimpanzees engage in it. Since in both humans and their closest relatives the process involves bluff, coalitions, and isolation tactics, a common terminology is warranted. The title of my book drove this point home. Whereas several political scientists had no objections, one among them felt a need to delineate humans as quite different.¹ As so often in the history of ape-human comparisons, ad hoc changes were made in the definition of a phenomenon so as to exclude the primate data. At a symposium on the application of political theory to animals, Glendon Schubert proposed that the term "politics" be reserved for processes within groups of at least one hundred individuals without kinship ties. This obviously excluded most social animals, as well as many situations in which humans play power games.

Chimpanzee Politics was written with a general audience in mind, but it also found its way into the classroom and to business consultants, and even became recommended reading for freshman congressmen. Because of the undiminished interest over a fifteen-year period, the Johns Hopkins University Press and I decided that it was time for a revised edition. There can, of course, be no rewriting of history: my original account of the power struggles has been left untouched. Rather, I have modified the text in view of new knowledge, added notes to highlight the latest research, reprinted all black-and-white photographs so as to reproduce them at optimal quality, added new photographs, both black & white and color (most of which have never been published before), and appended an Epilogue detailing subsequent developments in the Arnhem colony. The result, I hope, is a more attractive and updated version of the original book.

In explaining the insights gained from my study, I am tempted to draw a parallel with island biogeography. Ecological complexity increases with the number of species of plants and animals. Since islands usually have a smaller variety of species than the mainland, study of their flora and fauna has greatly helped clarify rules of extinction and survival as well as other basic ecological principles. The relative simplicity of islands has allowed naturalists, from Charles Darwin to Edward

Wilson, to develop ideas applicable to more complex systems. Similarly, the chimpanzee island at the Arnhem Zoo housed a limited number of chimpanzees, under simplified conditions compared with an equatorial rain forest. Imagine that the number of male players in the colony had been three times as high—as it often is in wild communities—or that the chimpanzees had been free to move on and off the island. I probably would not have been able to make much sense of the drama that was acted out in front of me. Like an island biogeographer, I saw more because there was less. Yet, the general principles that I uncovered apply not only to apes on an island but to jockeying for power everywhere.

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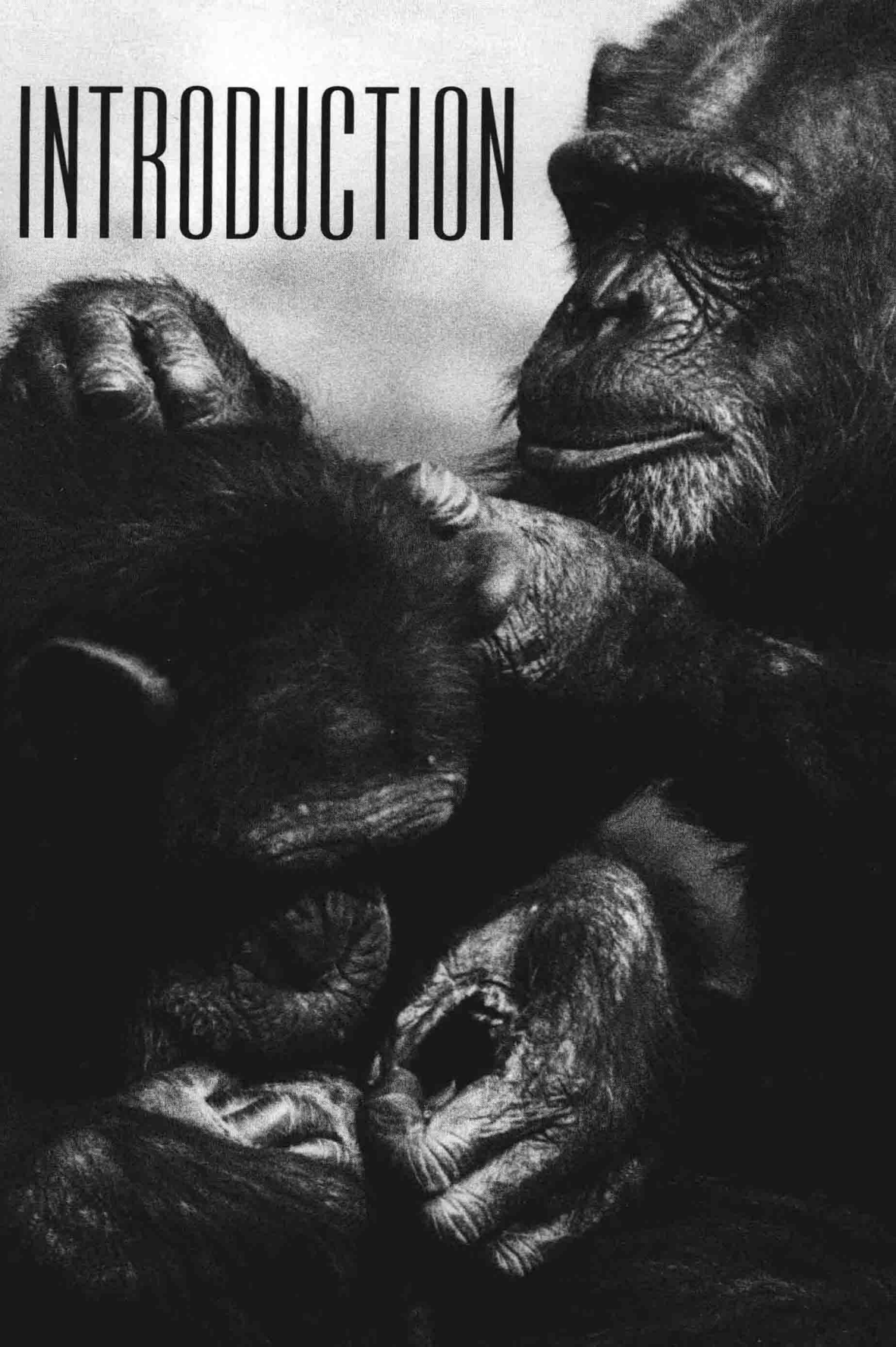
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CHIMPANZEE POLITICS

INTRODUCTION



VISITORS TO A ZOO ALWAYS APPEAR AMUSED BY THE SIGHT OF CHIMPANZEES. No other animal attracts so much laughter. Why should this be? Are they really such clowns, or does their appearance make them ridiculous? It is almost certainly their looks that amuse us, because they need do little more than walk around or sit down to make us laugh. The hilarity is perhaps a camouflage for quite different feelings—a nervous reaction caused by the marked resemblance between humans and chimpanzees. It is said that apes hold up a mirror to us, but we seem to find it hard to remain serious when confronted with the image we see reflected.

It is not only visitors to the zoo who are fascinated but uneasy in the presence of chimpanzees; the same is true of scientists. The more they learn about these great apes, the deeper our identity crisis seems to become. The resemblance between humans and chimpanzees is not only external. If we look straight and deep into a chimpanzee's eyes, an intelligent, self-assured personality looks back at us. If they are animals, what must we be?

A whole series of facts are now known which reduce the gap between humans and animals. Gordon Gallup has proven that great apes recognize themselves in a mirror. This form of self-awareness seems to be lacking among monkeys and other animals, who regard their reflection as if it were someone else. Wolfgang Köhler carried out ingenious intelligence tests on chimpanzees and concluded that they are capable of solving new problems on the basis of a sudden realization of cause and effect (the "aha! experience"). Jane Goodall saw wild chimpanzees using self-made tools. They were also seen to hunt, eat meat, extend their territory by means of "warfare" and even to be capable of cannibalism. Finally, the husband-and-wife team of R. Allen Gardner and Beatrix Gardner succeeded in teaching chimpanzees a large number of symbols, in the form of hand gestures, which they used to communicate in a manner surprisingly similar to the way we use language. These apes revealed a wealth of information about what they were thinking and feeling: the ape mind was made accessible to our species.

But however impressive all these discoveries may be, one important link is still missing: the social organization. There is evidence that chimpanzees lead a highly subtle and complex social life, but the picture is

Krom (left) and Gorilla grooming each other.

still disjointed. Up to now research into this particular field has been carried out almost exclusively with wild chimpanzees. These observations are extremely important, but it is impossible to follow social processes in every detail in the jungle. Fieldworkers are lucky if they so much as see the animals regularly. Out of the thousands of social contacts that take place in the undergrowth and in trees, they will witness only a few. They will not fail to note the results of social changes, but they will often be ignorant of the causes.

There is at present only one place in the world where a comprehensive study of the group life of these fascinating animals is possible: the large, open-air chimpanzee colony at Burgers Zoo in Arnhem. Such a study has been going on for some years now. This book presents the results and demonstrates something we had already suspected on the grounds of the close connection between apes and humans: that the social organization of chimpanzees is almost too human to be true. The clowns of the animal world would obviously feel very much at home in a political arena. Entire passages of Machiavelli seem to be directly applicable to chimpanzee behavior. The struggle for power and the resultant opportunism is so marked among these creatures that a radio reporter once thought to try and surprise me with the question: "Who do you consider to be the biggest chimpanzee in our present government?"²

Every day the newspapers administer large doses of political commentary. We are used to political developments being outlined for us in neat generalizations, such as "Split in government's camp plays into opposition's hands" or "Minister puts himself in an impossible position." Political journalists frequently do not enumerate the many factors and incidents which have led to this situation. No one expects them to go into exhaustive detail about all the political statements that have been made and all the confidential information they have gleaned. By and large their readers are satisfied with the general outline.

The events I witnessed in Arnhem could also be summarized in this way. It would certainly be the easiest way of talking about them, but the picture I would sketch would lack conviction. My interpretations are inevitably regarded with more suspicion than the interpretations of a political journalist. The term *politics* in itself gives rise to doubts where animals are concerned.

That is why I feel bound to approach the subject step by step, beginning with an outline, in this introduction, of what chimpanzee commu-