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Arts

Book Review

Natural Man

Steven Pinker aims to make the world safe for genetic scientists. But in debunking the idea of the blank slate, is he fighting the last war?

By John Homans

"Sophisticated people sneer at feel-good comedies and saccharine romances in which all loose ends are tied and everyone lives happily ever after," writes Steven Pinker in his new book, **The Blank Slate**. "Yet when it comes to the science of human beings, this same audience says: Give us schmaltz."

Pinker, professor of cognitive sciences at MIT and the author of, among other books, *How the Mind Works*, is decrying the bitter opposition to the new Darwinian sciences -- genetics, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, etc. -- that have flowered so spectacularly in the past 25 years. Nothing (with the possible exception of Henry Kissinger) has produced more campus pickets, charges of sexism and racism, or ad hominem attacks among people who pride themselves on their civility. The reason this is true, as Pinker knows, is that science is more dangerous than art. Science changes things. Darwin knew it, too: He held off publishing *The Origin of the Species* for twenty years, mostly to forestall the controversies he knew his ideas would detonate. The left has always seen in these sciences (with reason: Remember social Darwinism, eugenics, Nazism) a possible justification for the perpetuation of inequality and worse. Some evolutionary scientists, in turn, have often seemed to operate on the notion that leftists are cute when they're mad.

Pinker is not such a bomb thrower. *The Blank Slate* purports to make war on the reigning conception of human nature, but at many points it's more a defense of what's become the status quo. This is because the blank slate of the title -- the idea that human nature is malleable -- is, while not exactly a straw man, much less than a mainstream misconception in need of tearing down. The idea had its heyday in the fifties and sixties, with B. F. Skinner, Mao Tse-tung, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society (it wasn't that bad), and finally the Khmer Rouge. Their failure has made the notion of human reprogramming and perfectibility much less fashionable. The NYPD's CompStat is fashionable. Welfare reform is fashionable. We look -- even Democrats -- to fix what we can, to know our limits. Utopian ideas seem distant -- except maybe those that involve black-eyed virgins.

Pinker musters his vast armies of intellectual allies (these range from Kant to the editors of *The Onion*) and goes back into the past in search of enemies. He air-drops Camille Paglia into a dispute over rape with Susan Brownmiller. Tom Wolfe is wheeled into position to fire a volley at the ideological sins of modern art. Pinker picks fights with Skinner, Karl Marx, academic postmodernism, even the pope, and sends them packing, briskly though seldom cruelly. It's fun, but in these fights, the fix is in.

As Pinker rolls through the major areas of human endeavor installing his new scientific regime, he wages a hearts-and-minds campaign, reassuring people that they have nothing to fear that they didn't fear already. He looks for enemies on both the left and the right, so as to occupy the sensible center. Holding tight to his readers' lapels, he keeps insisting that the new insights into gender and the inheritability of intelligence aren't deterministic at all, and have the potential to make our politics more, not less, equitable. Political schmaltz, perhaps, but welcome in an overheated debate.

The fights are hotter on the shifting fronts where these new sciences touch the culture, and Pinker is not averse to stoking them. At one point, he offhandedly drops in the results of a study that found that the wages of women between the ages of 27 and 33 are 98 percent of what men's are in equivalent jobs. In a discussion about education, he writes: "No one wants to be the philistine who seems to be saying that it is unimportant to learn a foreign language, or English literature, or trigonometry, or the classics," before going on to imply something quite similar. In this book, long as it is, one often wants to hear more about the studies that Pinker supplies.

He also lends support to Judith Rich Harris's *The Nurture Assumption*, a book that makes the radical and counterintuitive claim that parental contribution in child-rearing hardly matters. The case is based on studies of identical twins raised in different families, and their remarkable correlation in IQ, personality, political affiliation, and uncanny consonances in seemingly random habits like gum-chewing.

It's an idea that makes any parent deeply uncomfortable. One immediately wants to argue: *Of course parents matter; where else would we get our neuroses?* At any rate, it's a truth, if it is a truth, that we are, luckily, programmed to ignore.

The Blank Slate

By Steven Pinker.

Viking; 508 pages; \$27.95

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