

The New Facts of Life

The American Prospect

Vol. 14, Issue 2, p. 45

Feb 2003

By Melvin Konner

BOOKS IN REVIEW

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature By Steven Pinker. Viking Press, 509 pages, \$27.95

AMONG THE CALAMITIES OF the 20th century were vast social experiments that tried to transform humanity with disastrous consequences. The Nazi experiment, based on the notion that evil is inborn in certain races, rejected education as a means of correction and instead pursued the extermination of millions of alleged incorrigibles. It drew upon a then-legitimate scientific tradition that had been widely accepted in Western countries for half a century. The Khmer Rouge experiment, based on the contrasting notion that complete "re-education" is possible, attempted to change the behavior of millions of Cambodians and killed them if they resisted change. Presumably their deaths would serve as salutary examples for survivors. Both these vicious programs, if they did not derive from theories of human nature, clearly derived comfort from them, and should lay to rest permanently the claim that such theories do not matter.

The question, of course--after getting the right theories--is how they should matter. Both of these books consider the implications for society of a new theory, which if it leans toward the inborn-nature side of the ledger does so in a more modest and sophisticated way than such theories have in the past. The importance of genes can no longer be denied. The genome has been sequenced, some diseases are yielding their secrets to genetic research and, in the realm of behavior, statistical studies are demonstrating genetic influences on everything from reaction time to religiosity and happiness. As for evolution, flat earthers are still denying Darwin, but in scientific circles he has won the day, and his theory and extensions of it are clearly more than a little relevant to behavior. Here, too, the approach bears little resemblance to the parallel efforts of the late 19th century. Finally, a revolution in brain science-- not least of all due to advanced techniques of brain imaging--has removed all reasonable doubt as to the isomorphism of brain and mind. This is a direct extension of the 19th-century program in brain science, but it is much, much better.

These two books promise to help us think through the social implications of this great transformation. The first, Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, is the broader and more ambitious work, attempting to show how commitment to a tabula rasa view of human nature has misled the modern social sciences and therefore misled policy. If it sometimes seems to be flogging a dead horse, it is nonetheless a brilliant and forceful summary of the current evidence for biological influences on human social life.

Pinker reviews the blank-slate notion from John Locke to Margaret Mead, thoroughly demolishing it with evidence for the power of genes in behavior, evolution in culture, brain in mind. With equal

cogency he also replies to challenges raised by recent advocates of blank slatism. How, for example, can the human genome, only twice as big as that of the near-microscopic roundworm, determine anything about our complex mental life? It can if we consider not just the number of genes but their interactions and hierarchical ordering. How can the human brain be less malleable than artificial neural networks, which have great capacity for learning? Because the brain has evolved over hundreds of millions of years and contains many pieces of dedicated circuitry-some as old or older than the hills-assembled largely by the genes.

In the philosophical core of his book, Pinker considers four feared outcomes of Darwinian theory: justifying discrimination, abandoning attempts to improve humanity, destroying free will and responsibility, and the loss of meaning and purpose from life. Each of these understandable fears, Pinker argues, is unfounded.

Asking if racism and sexism could be justified, he answers emphatically, "Absolutely not! The case against bigotry is not a factual claim that humans are biologically indistinguishable. It is a moral stance that condemns judging an individual according to the average traits of certain groups to which the individual belongs." Of course, if the average traits of certain groups do differ, that might lend support to "statistical discrimination." But in the case of race, Pinker points out that the biological differences are, in fact, trivial. Moreover, Jefferson's urging "that all men are created equal" was about rights, not sameness. Perfectibility, for its part, is enhanced by knowledge of our own natures. Furthermore, Pinker writes, a concept of human nature itself "provides a yardstick to identify suffering in any member of our species." It is because we have comparable natures that universal empathy for suffering is possible and universal notions of human rights valid.

As to responsibility, legal assessments increasingly entertain the argument that biological influences are exculpatory. But punishment also is an influence on human action that is mediated by the same brain that generated the crime. Both evolutionary and criminal psychologies suggest that the certainty of punishment turns the power of human nature against wrongdoing. Nor need biology drain life of meaning; Pinker cites Kant's awe at "the moral law within" as evidence of the opposite effect.

"A man has got to know his limitations," is the apt Clint Eastwood quote that sets the tone for the rest of the book, a well-informed and well-written account of those limitations. In a graceful interleaving of scientific and literary sources, Pinker takes us through some of what we know of our constraints. They are sobering. We unquestionably have selfish and violent tendencies, tempered mainly for our children and other close relatives and in reciprocal or gainful relations with others. For all our efforts at nurturance, Pinker finds little evidence that different styles of parenting significantly shape our children's personalities and behavior, instead ceding most causation to genes and peers. Unlike race, gender is a valid and significant biological and psychological category, which, despite huge overlaps between male and female, does help us predict some aspects of behavior and mental life.

The science dovetails with discussions of policy issues, and here Pinker is less helpful. For example, he quotes a Boston Globe columnist who asks, "So why is America more violent than other industrialized Western democracies?" The columnist gives a cultural answer, but Pinker proceeds to debunk all the usual cultural explanations. After explaining what he calls the "evolutionary logic of violence"-which he does very well-he goes on to say, "Human nature is the problem, but human nature is also the solution.") Alas, he only gives us evidence for the first half of that sentence, and he doesn't answer the Globe columnist's question. If Americans share the same human nature with people in much less (as well as much more) violent cultures, how can human nature explain the differences? This is not a minor problem; Pinker seems to believe that evolutionary biology has the answer to everything, but actually it

can only be a starting point and, in some ways, a guide for a complex biocultural analysis, most of which depends on the same social-science approaches that have served us in the past.

But it's enough to ask Pinker to debunk blank slatism, trace its history and offer a more than competent summary of what we know now about what evolution and genes have written on the slate without asking him to solve the problems, too. Pinker is not a policy maker, nor does he have all the answers to our social ills. But he does know one big thing: No policies of any sort, in any realm of life, can fare well ignoring human nature. Do the European democracies with lower levels of violence achieve that result through policies that reflect an understanding of human nature? Perhaps not in the scientific sense, but Europeans in general have always tended to be more cynical than Americans, less sanguine, for better or for worse, about the possibility of change. Americans have often done well with our high expectations, but unless we come to terms with the limitations of human nature, they will continue to stand squarely in our way.

...

Both these fine books help with a task that we all must begin to take seriously. Pinker and Rubin suggest that we are ready to overcome the fruitless nature-nurture battles, which have generated so much more heat than light, and do the hard work of incorporating advances in biology into our thinking about political and social life. I am not an optimist, but these two books are encouraging. Can it be that we have finally grown up?

MELVIN KONNER, the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Anthropology and associate professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at Emory University, is the author of *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit*, Revised and Updated Edition.