

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature
By Steven Pinker
Viking, 528 pages, \$27.95

Review by Paul R. Gross
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That a new book from the author of "The Language Instinct" and "How the Mind Works" would be praised but also damned, even before it hit the bookstores, was never in doubt. Steven Pinker is one of a small group of celebrated public advocates of sociobiology - that is, the biology-based study of social behavior, which has caused controversy ever since E. O. Wilson's book of the same name was published in the 1970s. Much of the activity in that discipline is today named "evolutionary psychology," but is, in effect, human sociobiology.

For the last 30 years, condemnation of sociobiology has been common across the spectrum of cultural politics, from the relic radical-Marxist intelligentsia of the left to the apologist creationists - including the trendier "intelligent design theorists" - on the religious right. Ordinary political conservatives are just as likely to denounce the application of what they miscall "Darwinism" to the study of human behavior as their ordinary liberal counterparts.

Comes now "The Blank Slate": a densely documented, elegantly written deflation of the shibboleth that the human mind, with all the behaviors it manifests, individual and social, is formed by experience acting upon what is at birth a blank slate (tabula rasa, as the Latin has it) - a featureless substrate (nature) for the constructive operations of experience (nurture). This belief is widely held by influential figures at both ends of that political spectrum.

Sophisticated bio-phobes do not insist that no part of human behavior is innate, only that nothing important in human behavior, in cognitive competence, in intellectual performance, is in any way innate or inherited. Mr. Pinker analyzes this universal but contra-factual conviction as composed of three stubbornly resilient memes: the empty tabula of mind per se; the noble savage (that is, the idea that social environment is the sole cause of human evil); and the ghost in the machine (that is, the belief that the real, conscious self is separate from physiology).

There has never been good evidence for them, so why such convictions should have come to dominate our social sciences and humanities, the academic left, the mainstream political culture of the West, and the religious right is a big question. That "why" is well examined and summarized in this book. But the author's core purpose, the bulk of this large volume, has a focus sharper than a general history of ideas. It is rather to convey the emerging consensus of an expanding scientific literature: That the blank slate model of mind is nonsensical and, more importantly, dangerous to our hopes as a species.

Mr. Pinker practices cognitive science by way of linguistics and psychology. Necessarily, he is also an evolutionist. The general outcomes of research on mind and behavior and of his own studies of language have led him - and many other students of mind - to a certainty: Human thought and behavior are ordinary, albeit astounding, products of the bio-historical continuum. The human brain-mind is one cell of a vast matrix of successful physiological systems, perfected on this planet via the operations of heredity, embryological development, and evolution - over eons, and in environments forever changing. Those processes are responsible for the changing forms of mind over evolutionary as well as organismal time; understanding them helps us to understand mind, just as it guides our study of the origins, shapes, and workings of other body-parts.

This truth, which has not been shocking since about 1870, by which time T.H. Huxley had trounced both Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Richard Owen in quite public controversies and most biologists had come to accept the plausibility of evolution, nevertheless remains radical, even among the well-educated. Although organized academic denial of it is only decades old, biophobia in social and religious thought is ancient. To be sure, one had to recognize innateness of a special kind almost to the up mid-19th century: where would the divine right of kings and the justifications of slavery have been without it?

But a biological continuum that includes and generates human thought has been throughout history a vile heresy. Men were not to be thought animals, even if what came in science after Vesalius showed, anatomically, that they are. More recently, aggressive certainty that parenting and environment alone create the minds of children has been required in Western thought of anyone seeking a place in polite company.

The burden of "The Blank Slate," and the research that it cites, is that it is impossible to understand human nature except as a significantly innate product of evolutionary history. So studying it generates important insights into why we do what we do. But an evolution-informed psychology, the book's argument goes - echoing the founders of sociobiology - does more. It allows us to understand what is limiting and self-destructive in our cognitive-behavioral repertoires (various forms of xenophobia and aggression, for example). Those endowments date from the Stone Age, and too little time has passed for them to have changed much. A truly evolutionary psychology is needed if we - the human species - are to consider how to overcome the mental tricks and limitations of a brute past. Along with justifiable praise worldwide for Mr. Pinker's exposition, there will soon be a literature carping about it. None of the grousing to date has attempted seriously to address the core scientific argument demonstrating that the slate is not blank, was never blank, cannot be blank. Pinker examines fairly the current scientific arguments in favor of blankness. They include the fashionable but incoherent "small number of genes" claim from the Human Genome Project; the learning capabilities of digital networks, and the plasticity in the brain - its ability to assume and manage old responsibilities in new locations.

Each of these bodies of knowledge is real. But the facile conclusion from each that the slate is blank at birth is confounded, politely but inescapably, by most of the evidence. This is all covered by Mr. Pinker, and it would be astonishing if all this did not have profound cultural implications, some of them disquieting. Pinker does not hesitate to address them - in politics, violence, gender, child-raising, even the arts. Is it any wonder that such a work will alarm the sentries posted atop the socio-cultural barricades?