

## **Alas, poor scholarship**

by Geoffrey Miller

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Tiresome, predictable, and badly researched, this 15-essay collection offers no coherent arguments against evolutionary psychology, but reveals instead the collective intellectual bankruptcy of its editors and contributors. The "evolutionary psychology" castigated here is not the modern science of human nature as it is actually developing, but a simplified, outdated, third-hand version that focuses too much on the writings of the field's best-known popularizers such as Steven Pinker, David Buss, Matt Ridley, and Dan Dennett. The essays attack the views of a few high-status, over-40 males, while discounting the excellent work being done by dozens of other researchers, including younger women such as Jennifer Davis, Linda Mealey, and Nancy Segal.

This sexist, elitist focus on the pop science brand names allows the contributors to portray evolutionary psychology as a homogenous cult, without acknowledging the unusually balanced sex ratio of researchers, the great diversity of research topics, and the intensity of critical debate within the field.

Most of the essays offer vague rebuttals to some of the early evolutionary psychology manifestos, challenging their emphasis on selfish gene theory, adaptationism, the modularity of the human mind, and the Pleistocene African environment of human evolution. These challenges are often wildly off-target. For example, Gabriel Dover's critique of selfish-gene theory humbly suggests that the entirety of evolutionary genetics is misconceived and should be rejected in favor of his "molecular drive" theory. Patrick Bateson points out that the word 'instinct' has too many meanings to be scientifically useful, without mentioning that this is precisely why most evolutionary psychologists avoid the term.

On the other hand, the three most sensible essays offer little that is new. Mary Midgeley argues that meme theory is a poor model of human culture, Anne Fausto-Sterling finds a feminist viewpoint scientifically useful, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith suggests the mind is more than a computer for "processing information". They seem unaware that many evolutionary psychologists, including me, have already made these points.

The contributors are largely sociologists of the 1960s New Left generation, whose critiques of 1970s sociobiology are recycled here with more political self-righteousness than scientific integrity. They characterize evolutionary psychology as pernicious conservatism, but fail to explain why it has attracted the support of so many socially conscious thinkers, ranging from the Leftist animal rights philosopher Peter Singer to the arch-critic of runaway consumerism, economist Robert Frank.

Their goal is not to improve evolutionary psychology, but to stop it because they think it has a hidden ideological agenda contrary to their personal views. In practice, they just want the social sciences to be left alone, empirically unaccountable to the biological sciences, and fiscally

unaccountable to tax-payers who are demanding more evidence-based social policies. Their anxieties stem from a distinctly intellectual kind of paranoia, a belief that science has far more power to shape political beliefs than it really does. Especially silly is the claim by the editors that evolutionary psychology's "right-wing libertarian attack on collectivity" drove the dismantling of the welfare state -- as if a few dozen psychologists could have more influence on government fiscal policy than the international bond market and other forces of economic globalization.

Many of the contributors work on the sociology of science, but it is unclear what sociological research methods they have used to understand the social dynamics of evolutionary psychology. They have not interviewed many researchers, or attended our conferences, or worked in our labs as participant-observers, or even surveyed our web sites.

The result is that they simply don't know what is going on in contemporary evolutionary psychology. The book doesn't even mention the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (evolutionary psychology's main research association), or our annual conference that has been running since 1988, or our official journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*.

Evolutionary psychology's most successful research programs are equally ignored, such as the wonderful confluence between developmental psychology research on 'Theory of Mind', primate research on 'Machiavellian intelligence', evolutionary social psychology research, and evolutionary game theory models of reciprocity and bargaining. Steven Rose even makes a bizarre claim that evolutionary psychology obsesses about cognition and ignores emotions. He seems to have missed the work of Paul Ekman on the facial expression of emotions, David Buss on jealousy, Randy Nesse on anxiety, Paul Rozin on disgust, and Sarah Hrdy on maternal affection, among many others.

Instead of making specific criticisms of particular research programs such as these, the book relies on the school playground technique of argument by name-calling. The "so-called science" of evolutionary psychology is characterized as "intellectual myth", "culturally pernicious", "biological fatalism", "bad theory", and "premature triumphalism" -- all by the end of chapter 1. Any idea that the contributors dislike is labelled a "fallacy". This humorless rhetoric wears thin very quickly, rendering the book no more fun to read than a prosecutor's edited transcript from a Stalin-era show trial.

Unfortunately, none of the contributors offers a viable alternative to evolutionary psychology as a way of integrating the biological, psychological, and social sciences. Typically, the essays end with meaningless appeals to go "beyond nature versus nurture". Their frequent use of words like "irreducible", "inextricable", and "unresearchable" reveals an anti-scientific mind-set. Instead of good, useful models of human nature, these writers want an "appreciation" of human experience in all its "irreducible" complexity -- like the useless map in the Borges story that, by leaving out no detail, was as large as the country it represented.

Constructive criticism serves a crucial role in science, but poorly-informed carping and grumbling from the sidelines does not. There isn't a single criticism in the book that has not already been raised and discussed with greater sophistication within evolutionary psychology meetings and journals. Any critic who knows enough about the current research to make intelligent suggestions for improving it might as well just join the scientific endeavor, and publish peer-reviewed science papers showing that their alternative leads to better theories and more discoveries. Instead, these writers have taken half-baked criticisms straight to the media, hoping that public hostility would lock away the scientific study of human nature in a tomb labeled "taboo".