

Steven Pinker. *The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. New York. Viking Penguin. 2002. 509pp.

“When I here the word Culture, I reach for my revolver” said Herman Goering. When Steven Pinker hears the word Culture he writes another 300,000 words about evolutionary psychology. His latest book elegantly reassembles themes from his previous bestsellers, *The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works*, in order to show that genetic explanations of human behaviour are compatible with a humane politically progressive view of social life. His final view of things is remarkably similar to that of Peter Singer in his recent *Darwin for the Left*. Innate propensities (differently distributed between the genders) for violence, competition, promiscuity and selfishness are part of our nature, together with capacities for nurture and cooperation and the purpose of social institutions should be to reinforce those which are beneficial and insure against situations such as lawlessness, massive inequalities of wealth, opportunity and status which are destructive of both the individual and social good.

His view of human nature and social institutions places Pinker in a political tradition which includes Machiavelli and Hobbes and his solutions recall those of prudent enlightenment optimist such as Adam Smith and the Federalists. This does raise an important question. Why do we need evolutionary psychology if these facts about human were available to anyone who had eyes to see centuries ago? Indeed, if Pinker is right and human nature is largely genetically determined it would be surprising if evolutionary psychology could tell us something we didn't already know about social interactions. It will simply tell us about the mechanisms of inheritance and the way genes influence developing brains and bodies to produce the behaviour we see around us. Mendel didn't need molecular genetics to predict the colours of the flowers on his pea trees and neither do we to predict that humans are competitive, acquisitive, jealous, violent, loving, cooperative, and altruistic as circumstances allow.

Pinker has gone to all this trouble however because he thinks for political and ideological reasons people on the left and right of politics and within the academy like to think that people are made what they are by Culture not Nature, as if Culture was an independent entity which somehow shapes the minds of the individuals immersed in it. The optimistic idea here is that if this is true and the human mind is shaped by its social environment then we should be able to make people nicer by changing the culture. Anorexia will disappear if we have more fat models, domestic violence will disappear if Snoop Doggy Dog makes a video of himself doing the dishes, and so on.

Pinker is with Freud on this one. Civilisation is inhibition. Unchecked by suitable institutions, human behaviour seeks the lowest common denominator of chimpanzee politics. It is not that we can't be altruistic, loving and cooperative. We can under certain conditions. But to pretend that our nature places no limits

on our minds flies in the face of the evidence. And this is why Pinker has gone to the trouble of presenting that evidence again and again, as well as assembling then sternly demolishing the ideological objections to it.

If we construct a scale from 1 to 10 which allocates explanatory priority in the explanation of human behaviour to genetic or environmental influence Pinker is about a 9.5). Blank Slaters are either zero (some of your wilder cultural studies Pomo, Emile Durkheim the founding father of sociology, and behaviourist psychologists of the 1930s) or 2 to 3 (classic empiricists like Locke Hume and Mill; contemporary developmental systems theorists in evolutionary biology and neural network modellers of human cognition. These last *drive Pinker mad* since he thinks they simply dress up ideas refuted in the seventeenth century in cognitive science jargon and announce a revolution in the understanding of the mind. It doesn't bother him that they say the same about him).

Since the answer is neither 1 nor 10 for any interesting trait the correct approach is to look at the evidence.

Pinker's approach is to use twin studies. Identical twins have the same genes (although possibly different uterine conditions) and, where one is adopted from birth, different environments. As he points out, almost everyone is happy to use these studies to draw conclusions about the heritability of schizophrenia, autism and a variety of mental disorders. Why should we not use them to tell us things about aggression, sociability, deference to authority, susceptibility to magical thinking, proneness to addiction, IQ, and other traits which show up as causes of the patterns in behaviour which are the raw material of social science.?

Why indeed? Many refuse to recognise a genetic contribution to any trait whose management is a political issue. Rape, sexism, IQ, and success at school are all examples. The worry is that the genetic contribution, if it can be demonstrated, will be used to justify socially regressive policies such as denying access to education to those with a propensity for lower IQ.

To start with an uncontentious example it has been demonstrated that adolescent boys *typically* have less inhibitory connections between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic (emotional) system than older men and adolescent women. As a consequence they don't evaluate dangerous situations by anticipating feelings of sorrow and pain which might ensue, for example, from a car accident. The social and emotional part so the adolescent male brain are not that different from the those of other primates who compete for status essentially byrisking physical harm. If this is true the correct response is a social policy directed at adolescent boys rather than the claim that they could not be genetically biased toward recklessness because everyone knows that reckless behaviour is something acquired by adolescent males through watching Bruce Willis and Jean Claude Van Damme.

Yet people have consistently argued that cannot be right to design policies aimed at genetically transmitted propensities because it is not genes, but the environment which is the primary cause of deviant or anti social behaviour. Parenting, schooling, peers or the wider society are the cause. No one doubts that they are contributory factors but Pinker's contempt builds as he considers and demolishes a series of attempts to deny the obvious: the probability of many antisocial behaviours such as rape and violent assault is raised by the presence of genetic factors.

Pinker is at great pains to point out that social justice, equality of opportunity, protection from physical injury and sexual violence are something required by a fair society *irrespective* of the causal origin (genetic or environmental) of violent crime. In fact, according to Pinker, the framers of the American constitution, particularly Madison, were no more or less than evolutionary psychologists like himself prescribing laws which allow individuals to flourish by limiting the harms they can visit on each other, reward and reinforce fragile propensities for cooperation and expand the scope for exercise of an innate sense of justice. However when we design policies to implement these ideals we need to understand the mechanisms which underlie the problems, and assuming that the passive absorption of Culture is the only mechanism leads to bad policies.

Once again Pinker has produced a wonderfully clear explanation of the relevant biological and psychological evidence. His knowledge is vast and his talent for uncondescending simplification makes him the ideal guide.

However because he wishes to rout his enemies entirely (he is a 9.5 recall)Pinker does overstage his case. What explains the difference between docile contemporary Scandinavians and the men of rapine who terrorised northern Europe only a few centuries ago? The genes are the same but where is the violence, rape and pillage? Surely history and politics have something to do with it.

At one point Pinker manages a pleasing *Coup de Theatre* while conceding to Blank Slaters. However he then goes on to claim that that the family is not a significant environmental influence. The child's peer group is far more important. You would do better for your child according to Pinker finding a good preschool than spending extra hours reading *Goodnight Spot* or making them play pointless educational games.

This argument, drawn from Judith Rich Harris' *The Nurture Assumption*, runs counter to almost every deep rooted intuition about childrearing which undergirds government policy. Pinker's point is just that. These are intuitions and intuitions, anecdotes and wishful thinking are not the same as evidence. Nonetheless some evidence seems to have escaped Pinker. The long term study by Paik and Comstock of the effect of televised violence on the behaviour of children (it tends to make them more violent) is not discussed.

Pinkers final considered position on all issues is usually temperate and conciliatory to the evidence but he has first to dispose of the bullshitters, grandstanders and ideologues on the other side. Once this is done the argument can resume on the basis of the evidence alone and here there is a lot more agreement than most are willing to admit for polemical purposes.