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19. Back to Nature (1997)

Debbie Cameron

Simone de Beauvoir said it in 1949: women are made, not born. Anatomy is not destiny, and sexism is not explained or justified by the facts of biology. This view is now orthodox liberal wisdom. Belief in biological determinism is confined to saloon-bar bigots and the sort of crusty old judge who has never heard of the Beatles.

Or is it? Intellectual fashion is as fickle as any other kind, and there are signs that biologism is becoming respectable again. In the 1970s it was Marx trendy intellectuals talked about, in the 1980s it was Freud, and now it's the turn of a third Bearded Victorian Patriarch, the evolutionary theorist Charles Darwin.

I first got wind of this a couple of years ago, when a friend put me on the mailing list of something called 'The Darwin Seminar', based at the London School of Economics. She thought I might want to keep a feminist eye on its doings, since as she put it, 'these people are sinister'. The Seminar proceeded to bombard me with literature: papers, summaries of papers, briefing notes, announcements of meetings. Whatever was being discussed, the theme was invariably that Darwin had all the answers. Writers were scathing about social scientists who treat standards of beauty or patterns of violent crime as social constructs.

The seminar's outpourings were sometimes reminiscent of religious fundamentalist tracts—ironic, when you consider who Darwin's main enemies were in his own time. The thought crossed my mind that it might be a front for the sort of right-wing crackpots who gave Darwin such a bad name in the heyday of the eugenics movement, and who still stir up controversy with their ravings about the 'underclass' or Black people's IQs.

But the Darwin Seminar is much subtler than that, much closer to the liberal mainstream. And the mainstream is increasingly taking notice of what it has to say. Its conferences get coverage in the quality press, books by its participants are widely reviewed, and the fashionable think-tank Demos recently devoted a whole issue of its house magazine *Demos Quarterly* to the seminar's ideas. The issue was called 'Matters of Life and Death: The world view from evolutionary psychology', and it ends with 'Ten Big Challenges from the Evolutionary Agenda', essentially a list of social policy proposals.

This does make me uneasy, since it suggests the new Darwinists are actively courting political influence. If there's a chance people with real power might take it

seriously, perhaps it's time to take a closer look at 'the world view from evolutionary psychology'.

Evolutionary psychology: back to (human) nature

Put in its simplest terms, evolutionary psychology (EP) is the application of Darwin's ideas to the study of human behaviour — how we think, feel and act. The main thesis of EP is that there is such a thing as 'human nature': a universal set of mental/emotional/behavioural traits which do not vary across cultures or change over time. These traits have become established because it was advantageous to ancestral humans to possess particular mental characteristics — just as it was advantageous to them to possess certain physical traits.

To understand what's being claimed here, it's useful to know that present-day evolutionary science has moved on from the Darwinian concepts most of us vaguely remember, such as 'survival of the fittest'. Probably the most important innovation is the theory of the 'selfish gene', according to which it is genes, rather than whole organisms, which compete for survival. For genes, 'survival' means being passed on to offspring. So an 'advantageous' characteristic in evolutionary terms is not necessarily one that keeps me alive longer or makes my life easier, it is simply one that maximises my chances of having offspring that carry my genes.

Humans reproduce sexually; evolutionary psychologists hypothesise that certain ways of thinking, feeling and acting enabled our ancestors to do this more successfully, and so they became part of our 'nature'. For example, it's suggested that our capacity for language and for cultural production (art, literature, etc.) originally served the purpose of making individuals who had those abilities more attractive to the opposite sex.

One of the more obviously barking contributions to *Demos Quarterly* applies this to politics, speculating that when students at Columbia University in New York protested against investment in South Africa in 1986, they were less interested in registering their disgust with apartheid than in advertising themselves to like-minded people who might want to mate with them. Unconsciously, protesters would reason: 'if s/he cares so much about people s/he's never met in South Africa, s/he will obviously be highly committed to the children who carry our genes'.

The 'unconsciously' is important here, for no one is arguing that humans *consciously* go to political rallies with the intention of picking up a suitable mate and having their children (this would be a particularly poor explanation of women's involvement in feminist politics!) The things we do now do not have to serve the same purpose in contemporary reality that they are said to have served for our

distant ancestors (who did not of course go to political rallies at all). Once evolution has made some psychological disposition the norm, we will go on expressing it in our behaviour regardless of whether it serves any purpose at all.

When it comes to sex-differences (evolutionary psychologists do not believe in gender) the key point is that women and men play differing roles in reproduction, and this is not just a physiological matter. The social costs of reproduction are different for each sex, and during the evolution of humankind it would therefore have been an advantage for males and females to develop different ways of thinking, behaving and feeling. As Darwin Seminar convenor Helena Cronin sums this up: 'Evolution made men's and women's minds as unlike as it made our bodies'.

In support of this argument Darwinists cite studies showing that in culture after culture, men seek 'mates' (scientist-speak for women/wives) who are younger than they are and meet certain standards of attractiveness, such as having symmetrical features and a waist to hip ratio of around 0.7. These desired qualities

are supposedly shorthand indicators of female fertility. Men's ancestors reproduced more successfully when their sexual preferences stopped them wasting time and genes on women who couldn't have healthy babies; present-day men inherit the 'advantageous' preferences.

Women, for their part, must invest considerably more time and effort in reproduction — at a minimum, the nine months of pregnancy. They are therefore more interested in whether a prospective mate can provide for them and their offspring. That's why studies find that women rate men on the size of their wallets rather than their waists. It's also why women are (allegedly) more hurt by men's *emotional* infidelities than their purely sexual ones. If a man has withdrawn emotionally he may decline to provide for his children. For men, it's women's sexual infidelity that poses the real threat. Women know the children they bear are carrying their genes; men have more reason to be anxious about this. In other words, given the unalterable facts of human sexual reproduction, natural selection would 'logically' favour men who felt sexual jealousy and women who prioritised emotional commitment.

Those of us who prefer sociological accounts are unlikely to be convinced by this reasoning. It is hardly surprising if women prefer men richer than themselves in a world where the vast majority of communities distribute wealth so unequally between the sexes. Women, by and large, *are* the poor: that in itself seems sufficient to explain why they so frequently marry men who are richer than they are.

Darwinists are curiously selective about *which* culturally widespread behaviours they choose to focus on. For example, the abuse of children by their stepfathers crops up repeatedly: statistics suggesting that stepchildren are at greater risk than natural children are seized on eagerly, because selfish gene theory predicts that men have a motive for harming children who do not carry their genes. (This is extrapolated from the behaviour of certain animals which will kill another male's children so their mothers stop lactating and become available to mate with the killer.) One of Demos's 'Ten Big Challenges' proposes that social policy around fostering, adoption, child protection and so on should take account of the deep-rooted tendency to favour one's own kin.

But this argument seems to miss out huge swathes of what feminists know to be reality. We know, for instance, that men's abuse of their natural children is not rare, nor is abuse by men who have no involvement with their victims' mothers (e.g. in residential care). It is also evident that abortion and infanticide (by mothers or their close female kin) are culturally and historically widespread practices. In these cases women decide not to bear or nurture children who obviously *do* carry their genes. Strangely enough, none of the contributors to *Demos Quarterly*

discuss the evolutionary advantages of this behaviour or call for the law to reflect its pervasiveness in human societies past and present.

From romance to rape

The assumptions Darwinists make about sex and reproduction lead them to some particularly strange and objectionable conclusions about rape. Robert Wright, in a piece for *Demos Quarterly* titled 'The dissent of woman', argues that the 'anguish' a woman feels after rape is much the same thing as she feels when she has (consensual) sex with a man who then leaves her. Women have intercourse willingly, apparently, only when they believe the man is committed to any offspring the act may produce. If it turns out the man was only pretending commitment, the woman feels duped. In the case of rape, she knows from the beginning that he is not committed to her or their joint offspring, and that is what makes the act uniquely unbearable.

If this were not so offensive you would laugh at the sheer absurdity of it, remote as it is from any actual experience of rape. It overlooks the physical and verbal abuse which often accompanies forced sex; it also overlooks that rape has much in common with sexual assaults which do not involve intercourse and so cannot result in conception. The woman's own body and sexuality are treated as being of no consequence; nor is there any recognition of the anger and outrage women justifiably feel when their wishes as well as their bodies are violated.

Robert Wright suggests that rape is what men resort to 'when other forms of manipulation fail' and there is thus no legitimate way to do what a man's got to do, which is ensure the survival of his genes. The problem men face is that women — the sex which invests more time and energy in reproduction — are choosier than men about who they mate with. Robert Wright describes the 'typical rapist' as 'lacking the material and personal resources to attract women', i.e. too poor, ugly and/or socially unskilled to be chosen voluntarily as a mate.

This shows a typically cavalier attitude to the research literature in disciplines outside biology, which consistently stresses how similar rapists are to other men. As one of the women who participated in Sue Lees's research on rape said about the man who attacked her, 'My mother couldn't believe how normal he looked'. Plenty of rapists also have 'legitimate' sexual relations: Sue Lees notes that 'many of [the serial rapists in her sample] are married or have girlfriends'. It is depressing that a scientist like Robert Wright should recycle the myth of rape as the expression of some desperate unmet need to have sex, when all the evidence decisively contradicts this view.

Repulsive though it is, Robert Wright's argument has some unexpected points of contact with radical feminist analysis. The feminists this author has real contempt for are liberal 'equality' feminists who vainly imagine that women and men can be held to a single, genderless standard of behaviour. Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon make more sense to him — at least as he reads their arguments. Thus he quotes Andrea Dworkin's statement about what men can do to get sex from women: 'steal it (rape), persuade her to give it away (seduction), rent it (prostitution), lease it over the long term (marriage in the US) or own it outright (marriage in most societies)'. And he adds: 'this would strike some Darwinians as a fair thumbnail sketch of the situation'.

Wright believes that the mindset produced in women by natural selection makes us 'uniquely vulnerable' in ways that ought to be recognised by the law. One of the 'Ten big challenges from the evolutionary agenda' is:

Male and female psychologies have evolved to be distinctly different in assessing the costs — indeed, the very notion — of anti-social behaviour. *Our legal system should reflect these differences if it is to promote true equality before the law* (p.48, original emphasis).

The suggestion that women's distinctive 'nature' be reflected in law illustrates a difference between the new Darwinism and cruder forms of pop sociobiology. The latter often seemed to be saying: 'this is how things are; they can't be changed, so get used to it' — where 'it' could be anything from war to sexual harassment to men spending all their time bonding with each other in the pub. New Darwinists not only suggest that we *can* make better social arrangements (since intelligence and altruism are also part of evolved 'human nature'), some believe this is the most important use to which scientific knowledge about our 'natures' can be put.

Another difference between EP and earlier sociobiology is that the new Darwinists are smart enough to realise that overt displays of sexism and antifeminism will not help their case. Instead, their strategy is to insist that feminists have nothing to lose, and even something to gain, by taking Darwinist approaches on board: appealing to biological difference actually *strengthens* the feminist argument on issues like rape.

This is a bit like saying that because radical feminists and fundamentalist Christians agree in opposing pornography, they are 'really' political allies. True, if Demos's 'big challenge' quoted above were taken seriously, the outcome might not be a million miles from certain feminist ideas about reforming the criminal justice system. Many radical feminists agree that so-called gender-neutral justice works against women: in

certain cases (such as the proposed self-preservation defence for battered women who kill their abusers) feminists do want women to be treated differently in law. But the reasoning behind the Demos proposal is light years away from radical feminism: what feminists criticise is not the law's failure to recognise biological sex-differences but its failure to recognise material differences of *power*.

Another strategy the Darwinists use to neutralise feminist criticism without appearing overtly antifeminist is to appeal to the truth and objectivity of science, branding critics as ignorant, superstitious ideologues. Helena Cronin provides an example:

Science simply tells it like it is; it doesn't dictate goals. But how can we promote a fairer world—from social and legal policy to personal relationships — unless we understand differences, unless we let truth, not ignorance, be our guide?

This is highly disingenuous, glossing over the way scientific 'truth' is shaped by the power structures of the societies in which science is done. Even a cursory glance at the history of theorising about sex-differences casts doubt on the claim that 'science simply tells it like it is'. The 19th century experts who claimed that higher education would shrink women's ovaries said the same things about scientific truth that Helena Cronin says: if we are sceptical about the motives behind the earlier claim (not to mention knowing for a fact that it was drivel), why should we take analogous claims at face value now? History tells us that the political costs invariably outweigh the benefits of locating women's 'nature' in our reproductive organs.

The dangers of Darwinism

Gross abuses have been perpetrated in the name of Darwin, most notably where ideas about 'survival of the fittest' have been used to justify the sterilisation or, in Hitler's case, the wholesale extermination of the so-called 'unfit'. By comparison, the political pretensions of evolutionary psychology look benign; at least its agenda is not genocidal. It is, however, potentially oppressive and reactionary, for it rests on the idea that if some arrangement is 'natural', rooted in the fundamental needs and instincts of human beings, it is by that same token the arrangement most conducive to happiness and social justice.

The idea that our social and political arrangements should work with the grain of our 'nature' runs through the whole tradition of western political thought, where it was well-established long before science arrived on the scene. But the tradition in question is a classically patriarchal one, centring on the nature, the needs and rights

of 'Man', i.e. white European property-owning males. At different times, its concept of what is 'natural' (and thus politically desirable, or inevitable) has encompassed the enslavement of Africans, the wholesale destruction of indigenous populations by colonisers and the condemning of poor people in vast numbers to death from disease and starvation. In other words, definitions of the 'natural' have reflected the perceptions and interests of those doing the defining.

That is why I find it shocking when Helena Cronin — a woman and in her own estimation a feminist — affirms that 'evolution made men's and women's minds as unlike as it made our bodies'. I cannot help hearing echoes of every misogynist thinker — Rousseau, Nietzsche, the fascists of the early twentieth century — who ever proclaimed the same doctrine. Different minds, separate spheres, *kinder, küche, kirche*: even dressed up in new Darwinist clothes, how can such concepts be compatible with feminism?

The short answer is, they can't: modern feminism was founded on an explicit rejection of the belief that women and men have naturally different minds. Two centuries ago, writers like Mary Wollstonecraft argued that ideas about 'natural' sex difference were a key ideological weapon in men's struggle to maintain their unjust dominance over women. They still are.

In order to resist 'the world view from evolutionary psychology', we need not get bogged down in 'nature versus nurture' arguments about whether there really is a gene for female intuition, or ironing, or whatever the scientists have come up with this week. The point we have to get across is that nature, or difference, is not the issue. What matters to feminists is not whether our social arrangements are 'natural' but whether they are *just*.

The point is made neatly if we turn once again to history. When the suffragettes were fighting for women's right to vote, they used the slogan 'justice demands it'. Their opponents by contrast said it was 'going against nature' to burden women with political responsibilities. Nature is the sexists' trump card; justice is ours. And justice demands that we expose Darwinist ideas about men's and women's 'natures' for the half-baked and wholly ideological claptrap they are.

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