

## Tunnel vision

Pinker, Steven. 2002. *The blank slate: the modern denial of human nature*. London: Penguin. 509 pp.

The gap between sociocultural anthropology and biological/physical anthropology is deep, but fairly recent. In the 1870s, Tylor enjoyed a fruitful relationship with the Darwinists; he was inspired by, and in turn inspired, Darwin himself. Later generations also engaged in respectful dialogue until, roughly, the end of the Second World War.

After the war, biological approaches to human nature and culture were discredited in public life, only to reemerge with a string of popular books by the likes of Desmond Morris and Lionel Tiger, culminating in the last chapter of E. O. Wilson's scholarly work *Sociobiology* (Wilson 1975), where the great entomologist pleads for a reintegration of the social sciences into the mother science, that is to say biology. The relationship between sociocultural anthropologists and some evolutionary biologists (who we may call neo-Darwinists) has been tense and occasionally hostile since then.<sup>1</sup>

Certain developments in recent years nevertheless suggest that the aggression and deliberate mutual misunderstandings typical of the sociobiology debate may have given way to a more sober and relaxed attitude among social anthropologists confronted with biological explanations of sociocultural phenomena. According to Knight *et al.* (1999), social and biological anthropologists in Britain had not really spoken to each other between the Royal Society conference about ritualisation among humans and animals in 1965 and a similar, but smaller conference on ritual and the origins of culture in 1994. A few years after this event, a number of social anthropologists contributed to a volume about 'memetics' (Aunger 2000; for a scathing critique see Marks 2002b) dominated by Darwinian scholars, and around the same time, a symposium organised by Harvey Whitehouse (2001) brought together different views on the role of evolution in shaping religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps social anthropology is keen to find its feet again after postmodernism, and is therefore more open to ambitious and robust modes of explanation? Certainly, the new evolutionary psychology appears to more relevant and better informed about cultural variation than the old sociobiology, whose macho obsession with sex and violence, and naïve search for adaptive functions everywhere in cultural practices, could hardly win the admiration of many sociocultural anthropologists. Many of the positions taken by the sociobiologists were so embarrassing that they were usually passed over in silence – except, for example, when someone like Ingold (1986) pointed out that Edward O. Wilson, happily oblivious of intellectual history, had reinvented Tylor's comparative method from the late 19th century in his energetic attempt to 'reintegrate' the social sciences into biology.

<sup>1</sup> Many highly regarded evolutionary biologists, including Richard Lewontin, Steve Jones, Stephen Jay Gould and Steven Rose, have criticised neo-Darwinism or 'selfish-gene biology' along similar lines as anthropologists, pointing out its simplistic and ideological tendencies.

The re-branded Darwinist social science, evolutionary psychology, does appear to have moved away from the crude reductionism represented in the previous generation. Based on a more sound knowledge of social science and cultural variation, it does not presuppose that culture is *per se* adaptive in a biological sense (an absurd position), but is instead concerned with identifying evolved cognitive mechanisms which developed in response to selective pressure and which remain part of our cognitive architecture today, although they no longer necessarily serve an adaptive function. Evolutionary psychologists are interested in religion and reciprocity, they discuss theories about the first strike in prehistory and the role of gossip in early language, and it may seem as if the conditions for fruitful interaction across the intradisciplinary divide have been considerably improved over the past couple of decades.

Evolutionary psychology tries to solve what we could call Wallace's problem. Alfred Russel Wallace, who developed the theory of natural selection independently of Darwin, believed that the human body was clearly a product of natural selection, whereas the immense complexity of the human mind needed another explanation, since he found it difficult to believe that primitive peoples needed a mind enabling them to build cathedrals or compose Beethoven's ninth symphony, which they were never going to do anyway. Darwin responded to Wallace's challenge in *The Descent of Man*, arguing that primitive man would need as much intelligence, inventiveness and ingenuity as he could possibly muster in order to survive, in other words that the staggering complexity of the human brain was a result of natural selection, just as much as he (women were not yet reckoned with) needed his opposable thumbs and bipedal gait. The central issue engaging evolutionary psychologists, and which might also engage social anthropologists, concerns – provided Darwin is right against Wallace – what exactly this evolved mind looks like: to what extent it gives instructions that still guide our thought and behaviour, and, conversely, to which extent it is flexible and open-ended.

However, apart from a handful of attempts (e.g. Boyd and Richerson 2005; Durham 1991; Kuper 1994, plus the aforementioned), the dialogue remains all but absent. The *Heart of Darkness in El Dorado* controversy (Tierney 2000; Borofsky 2005) brought out both bitterness, rage and supremacist rhetoric in both trenches in the United States, and in Europe, it would be an overstatement, to put it mildly, to say that evolutionary biology has become a trendy subject in social anthropology. In fact, the relationship is largely one-sided: evolutionary psychologists publish provocative tracts denouncing the naïveté of unreformed and unconverted social anthropologists and other social scientists, who rarely bother to respond. When the latter actually do engage with biological anthropologists, they often feel, like Ingold (2007), that their intellectual position is not taken seriously. In the academic Bible of the evangelical movement of evolutionary psychology, *The Adapted Mind*, Tooby and Cosmides (1992) accuse standard social science of barking up the wrong tree; and on the blurb of a recent bestseller by Steven Pinker, science writer Matt Ridley claims that this is the best book that he or anyone *will ever read* about the human mind (Ridley in Pinker 2002).<sup>2</sup> Faced with such inexplicable confidence, it is our duty to find out, at the very least, what they are so confident about (and, perhaps, why they sell so many books).

Steven Pinker, a psychologist specialising in the study of language acquisition, had already published two acclaimed popular books (Pinker 1995, 1997) when *The Blank*

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Ridley himself produced a superior account the following year (Ridley 2003).

*Slate* appeared in 2002. In this thick volume, Pinker pursues a single argument to great effect by ploughing it through acres of carefully selected empirical research. Essentially, the book presents an innatist alternative to the idea that humans can learn anything, appreciate anything and subscribe to any kind of value system because their mind is, *pace* Locke, a blank slate. Against this view, ostensibly held by droves of academics and decision-makers, Pinker develops a model of the mind as a product of evolution, responding to constraints and incentives in the environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA), and conditioning us to act and think in particular ways. Pinker tries to avoid the trap of simple determinism, and is keen to emphasise that political and personal decisions must necessarily be taken to mitigate adverse effects of our inborn nature – or, as the case might be, to do the opposite, that is bringing our lives more in line with our inborn nature. Pinker has chapters on art (modern art is dysfunctional because it fails to conform to our innate ideas of beauty and harmony), on gender (why not just admit that male and female minds are different?), on intelligence, childraising, violence and so on. The book is chatty and overly long, it reiterates familiar arguments, misrepresents social scientists and oversells its own originality – and yet it clearly deserves to be read by sociocultural anthropologists: Pinker raises questions which are essential to every anthropologist, concerning the articulations between the universal and the particular, and between the innate and the acquired. It is a fundamentally flawed book, yet one which helps to clarify the mind, though perhaps not always in ways intended by the author.

Pinker sets out to refute three ideas which, according to him, have dominated 20th century social science thinking: (i) the notion that the mind is ‘a blank slate’; (ii) the Rousseauian myth of ‘the noble savage’ (people are inherently good) and (iii) the fiction of ‘the ghost in the machine’, that is the autonomous soul. In building up his argument against these pernicious ideas, Pinker quotes liberally from social scientists, many of them anthropologists, who appear to support these notions. Most of the quotations are old, some are misplaced, and in not a few cases, Pinker appears to have misunderstood his sources. This is clearly the case when he enrols Ashley Montagu and Clifford Geertz (not to speak of Lévi-Strauss!) into the army of social scientists who deny that humans are limited by their inborn potentials.

*The Blank Slate* initially left this reader in a state of exasperation. At the end of the day, Pinker had produced not so much a scholarly exploration as a polemical essay. His overt views are not only political in their implications, but often explicitly so, for example in his discussions of gender and crime. His selective use of research findings, slanted interpretations and incessant search for the simplest explanation conceivable make the book an irritating read. However, with the hindsight of a few years, I have come to conclude that there are three qualities of Pinker’s book that deserve the close attention of anthropologists: It is exemplary (an almost archetypal specimen of its kind); it is written in a very engaging style (unlike most anthropology books); and it raises questions which ought to have been taken seriously by anthropologists.

*The Blank Slate* shares a number of characteristics with authors otherwise as different as the strictly academic writers Tooby and Cosmides (1992), and popularisers like Desmond Morris and Robert Wright; and Pinker’s book may be the most lucid formulation of evolutionary psychology orthodoxy so far. These authors (and many others) share a number of convictions, the most important of which are: (i) The Standard Social Science Model (SSSM, Tooby and Cosmides 1992) held by most social scientists and policymakers presupposes that humans are infinitely malleable and have no specific

'human nature'; (ii) this model urgently needs to be replaced by ICM (the Integrated Causal Model), which accepts that human nature, including the human mind, is evolved, and that human thoughts and actions thus have to be understood within the general framework of neo-Darwinian theory; and (iii) the competition between the muddle-headed wishful thinking of SSSM and the no-nonsense scientific rationality of ICM is a cultural battle sufficiently important to justify the use of a rhetoric reminiscent of evangelical preachers or Marxist revolutionaries.

There are serious problems with this position, the most obvious being that few serious scholars actually believe that evolved traits and environmental conditioning are mutually exclusive as explanatory frameworks (for more tempered views see, e.g. Durham 1991; Kohn 1999; Kuper 1994; Malik 2000; Marks 2002a; Ridley 2003). In creating their straw men, authors like Pinker have no other option than to quote dated social science (Margaret Mead and Leslie White are among his favourites) or contemporary scholars out of context. The most revealing example is the use of Clifford Geertz, one of the few contemporary anthropologists cited by Pinker. Now, Geertz rarely wrote explicitly on human nature in the context of evolution. However, in a couple of essays from the early 1960s, he discusses evolution explicitly and without irony (Geertz 1973a, 1973b). The views developed there are consistent with his later positions.

In the first essay, 'The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man', Geertz departs from standard evolutionist accounts by proclaiming that '[t]o take the giant step away from the uniformitarian view of human nature is, so far as the study of man is concerned, to leave the Garden [of Eden]' (Geertz 1973a: 36). He then moves on to describe, and dismiss, what he calls the 'stratigraphic' conception of the relation between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors (37). This view presents the human condition as one characterised by hierarchical stratification, that is watertight boundaries between kinds of factors. This is not so, according to Geertz: humans are cultural all the way through. Moreover, universals are empty containers that give an illusion of similarity where there is dramatic variation. Human evolution, he then says, is characterised by ongoing mutual feedback between culture and biological properties. The need for 'external control mechanisms' (44) embedded in culture is desperate and chronic in the case of humans. Our lack of fixity means that there is no natural way of being human. Commenting on universals, he considers religion as a candidate, but points out that there is an extraordinary difference between 'the obsessive ritualism and unbuttoned polytheism of the Hindus and . . . the uncompromising monotheism and austere legalism of Sunni Islam' (40). Like Kroeber before him, Geertz sees alphabetic lists as establishing 'fake universals' – from Wissler to Murdock and Kluckhohn. (Brown 1991 might be added.)

In the following essay, 'The growth of culture and the evolution of the mind' (Geertz 1973b), Geertz develops a perspective on the evolution of mind. He begins with the familiar contrast of freedom versus determinism, where he approvingly quotes Ryle, who says that it is rubbish to posit the two as opposites, since a golfer can perfectly well obey the laws of ballistics, the rules of golf *and* play with elegance (57). It occurs to me that Steven Pinker could have said that. (In fact, E.O. Wilson once did.)

Geertz then elaborates on the view of human evolution also presented in the previous essay: culture began, embryonically, already with proto-humans millions of years ago, whose brains were a third the size of ours. Through mutual reinforcement – culture contributed to the growth of the cortex (presumably through changing the

circumstances of natural selection) and vice versa – and rendered us flexible and generally endowed. ‘Though it is apparently true enough that the invention of the airplane led to no visible bodily changes, no alterations of (innate) mental capacity, this was not necessarily the case for the pebble tool or the crude chopper, in whose wake seems to have come not only more erect stature, reduced dentition, and a more thumb-dominated hand, but the expansion of the human brain to its present size’ (67). Finally: ‘In fact, this type of reciprocally creative relationship between somatic and extrasomatic phenomena seems to have been of crucial significance during the whole of the primate advance’ (68) and ‘The human brain is thoroughly dependent upon cultural resources for its very operation; and those resources are, consequently, not adjuncts to, but constituents of, mental activity’ (76).

Put differently, there is no way of being human apart from the culturally specific ones. The question is, where does this view depart from that of Pinker? One of Pinker’s supporters, Matt Ridley (2003), has analysed the interplay between innate potentials and experience in ways largely compatible with both Geertzian hermeneutics and neo-Darwinism. Pinker himself pays lip service to such perspectives, but in the end he opts for single-factor explanations in a series of Manichean either–or manoeuvres where the answer, no matter the question, is always natural selection.

Perhaps the most damaging weakness in books of the generic *Blank Slate* kind is their intellectual dishonesty (evident in the misrepresentation of the views of others), combined with a faith in simple solutions to complex problems. The paucity of nuance in the book is astonishing. For example, Pinker argues throughout the book that parents and other environmental factors have no important effects on the personality of a child. This position is as absurd as its opposite, that is unreformed behaviourism (the view that environmental factors account for everything, inborn characteristics for nothing).

The valid insights in *The Blank Slate* tend to be banal – family is important, intelligence is partly inherited, dominance and violence exist across human societies etc. (p. 294) – but such generalities quickly turn into absurdities when they are not supplemented with an understanding of actual existing societies. The ‘human being’ of writers like Pinker is abstract in the same sense as Richard Dawkins’ ‘gene’ (Dawkins 1976). It lacks the specificity of real existing humans: even if men have an inborn aggressive tendency, biology cannot explain why homicide is common in Philadelphia but rare in Toronto; whether or not there exists ‘a gene for alcoholism’, it cannot explain why alcoholism is widespread in Britain but uncommon in Iran.

Books like this are based on the premise that the human mind has evolved through natural selection, interpreted as individual competition for offspring and genetic fitness; consequently, that a wide range of human activities are ultimately biologically based and can be traced back to the struggle for survival in the ‘environment of evolutionary adaptation’. There are many difficult issues to be grappled with here, not least concerning the relationship between group, individual and ecosystem in the evolutionary process. Another cluster of questions pertains to the relationship between biology, culture and existential freedom. Pinker is right in pointing out that social scientists have not generally taken these questions sufficiently seriously. Yet he himself does not even begin to deal with interactions between individual and group, individual and sub-individual entities (genes, cells etc.), or biology, culture and individuality. He offers the simplest conceivable answers to some of the world’s most difficult questions.

Writers of the Pinker kind tend to come into difficulties when they write about free will. If one correctly identifies the complex relationship between inheritance, the social

and natural environment and freedom, the doctrine about the genetic programmes of the mind becomes a watered-down and relative kind of truth, of little direct use in formulating slogans and policies. Pinker resists this temptation. Yet he admits that if he does not like what the genes ask him to do, he will ask them to 'go and jump in the lake'. But if he and everybody else possesses this kind of freedom, what remains of the evolutionary origins of the mind? Certainly enough to make a difference. But not much more than Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz and other social constructivist *Prügelknaben* have conceded time and again: we are born with innate predispositions, but they always articulate with the environment and with the exertion of free choice, leading to cultural and individual variations which need more complex explanations than the just-so stories of neo-Darwinism. Again, this does not mean that biology or even neo- or ultra-Darwinism is irrelevant, only that it is insufficient in itself.

The success of books like *The Blank Slate* should be read as a call for arms. What is needed from anthropology now is not rejection through dialectical negation, but better answers to the questions raised by Pinker and his allies. Writers influenced by neo-Darwinist simplifications currently dominate the market for books answering questions about what it is to be human. There is a niche waiting to be filled by writers who take more balanced views, and failing to make a bid for this space would not merely be a matter of an opportunity lost, but an abdication.

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