

The Politics of Biology

by Melvin Konner

NOT IN OUR GENES: BIOLOGY, IDEOLOGY AND HUMAN NATURE, by Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin. Pantheon Books, \$21.95; 322 pp.

The authors of *Not In Our Genes* are engagingly frank about their purposes: "We share a commitment to the prospect of the creation of a more socially just—a socialist—society. And we recognize that a critical science is an integral part of the struggle to create that society, just as we believe that the social function of much of today's science is to hinder the creation of that society by acting to preserve the interests of the dominant class, gender, and race." They state that they are part of what they call "the radical science movement," dedicated to "the possibility of a critical and liberatory science." In a footnote on page 4 they are even more explicit in characterizing the ideas they will criticize: "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships." While it would be insulting to the subtlety of current Marxist thought to view this bit of nineteenth-century dialectical reflexology as being in the Marxist mainstream, that appears to be how the authors would like to be seen.

The book consists of two interwoven efforts. One is a quite acceptable review of the dismal historical record of abuse of ideas in behavioral genetics. Cited are the abuse of IQ testing to support discriminatory immigration policy in the United States, of ethological and other ideas in behavioral genetics to support Nazi racial policies, and of ideas about sex differences to support discrimination against women. This history has been reviewed in several recent and better books, such as Steph

Chorover's *From Genesis to Genocide*; still, I do not think it can be repeated too often. Not surprisingly, the authors barely mention similar abuses that have occurred under political systems that espouse a cultural-determinist ideology.

The other strand of argument is a critique of modern behavioral science, from intelligence testing to sociobiology. Using familiar rhetorical techniques from the looms of politics, they weave an extraordinary fabric. For example, they attribute to something they call "the mental testing movement" the belief that "the successful possess an intrinsic merit, a merit that runs in the blood: Hereditary privilege becomes simply the ineluctable consequence of inherited ability." They note that Alfred Binet, the founder of mental testing, held no such belief—indeed he opposed it. But they go on to review recent writings—those of Cyril Burt and Arthur Jensen are the most egregious examples—that seem to identify mental testing with justified hereditary privilege. Nowhere do we learn that to the extent that there is a "mental testing movement" in modern psychology, it is dedicated to just that—mental testing. Modern texts on the subject have a pragmatic rather than theoretical quality, but they recognize the importance of culture and learning in influencing IQ, as well as the limitations and flaws of the tests and the potential for their abuse. The value of such tests is that they predict school success and identify specific problems that may result in school failure. These are the limited but quite useful goals of "the mental testing movement," which in *Not In Our Genes* is nothing more than a straw man.

Another of the book's "critical" tactics is to create the impression of guilt through association. In a remarkable paragraph on "biological determinists," the authors begin by quoting the nineteenth-century zoologist Louis Agassiz to the effect that the human sciences can in principle be freed of politics and religion. They go on: "The

sentiment was echoed in 1975 by yet another Harvard professor and biological determinist, Bernard Davis, who assures us that 'neither religious nor political fervor can command the laws of nature.' " In the next sentence they quote Agassiz's statement that "the brain of the negro is that of the imperfect brain of a seven months infant in the womb of the white," a lamentably common belief of the era. Davis's reasonable philosophic comment is interposed between two by Agassiz, one reasonable and one blatantly racist; Davis is thus tarred with the racist brush. The fact that such a slur escaped the notice of three authors and at least one editor says much about the shrill tone of the book. (Incidentally, beliefs about the mental inferiority of blacks were held by most nineteenth-century intellectuals, including Marx and Engels.)

The book moves on to questions in psychiatry and neurology, treating them in a way that can only be called negligent. They attack the use of methylphenidate (Ritalin) in attention deficit disorder, which they pointedly miscall by the old label minimal brain dysfunction. This misnomer, abandoned by the 1980 edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* ("DSM III"), is preserved by Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin because it is easier to criticize than the more purely descriptive current term, attention deficit disorder. They show no understanding of the criteria for this diagnosis or its treatment of choice. They state that "psychosurgery is not much more precise than the work of a saboteur pulling out at random printed circuit boards from a computer"; one does not have to be an enthusiast of psychosurgery to recognize this statement as an extremely misleading exaggeration. They reduce the use of such powerful and effective therapies as lithium and antipsychotic drugs to profit schemes of drug companies (particularly improbable in the case of lithium, which is provided in the form of

simple salts and therefore inexpensive). They impugn the use of these and other agents—even L-dopa for Parkinson's disease—on the grounds that, like almost all medical therapies, they are not completely successful, their actions are not fully understood, and they have significant adverse effects. The three authors, an evolutionary geneticist, a neurobiologist, and a professor of psychology, are presumably immune from the professional censure that physicians would face if they made such irresponsible statements about the treatment of serious illnesses; but I think that their ignorance of what psychiatrists and neurologists try to do, in the face of dreadful but often treatable disorders, will be obvious to most readers.

Their rhetorical approach to sociobiology (chapter 9) will by now be familiar. A trivialized version of Hobbes's political philosophy provides the context. Then the weakest—never the strongest—studies and statements in this field (including popular writings by journalists who have no claim to scientific stature) are substituted for the field itself (which would be somewhat more challenging to criticize). We are told that E.O. Wilson's 1975 book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, was a manifesto "legitimizing a hierarchical, entrepreneurial, competitive society" and that it succeeded because of an elaborate collusion between its publisher, the editors of the *New York Times*, and other members of the ruling class. We would scarcely guess that the book was a success because it was the most comprehensive textbook of animal behavior and behavioral ecology ever written and was widely acclaimed as such; or that it was reviewed favorably, in the *New York Review of Books*, by C.H. Waddington, a leader of British genetics and a lifelong progressive; or, least of all, that it has a long chapter on the development and modification of behavior that is more sophisticated and more constructive in its environmentalism than anything to be found in *Not In Our Genes*.

The social and economic determinants of inequality, which are more powerful and more immediately relevant than any biological ones underlying them, will be elucidated not by this sort of "critical and liberatory science" but by the work of historians such as Barrington Moore, economists such as Wassily Leontief, cultural anthropologists such as Marvin Harris. As for the realm of individual development and learning, behavioral science abounds with research that proves the important effects of experience. But when all is said and done, there remain some important effects that can only be attributed to the genes. Suppose we grant for the sake of ar-

gument (there is certainly no other reason to grant it) that there is now no conclusive evidence for genetic influences on complex human behaviors. Surely these authors realize that this situation may change, that in the future there may be evidence that would convince even them. Since they have staked so much of their egalitarian ideology on the notion that there are no important effects of genes, what will become of that ideology? It is a philosophically weak form of egalitarianism that depends on genetic uniformity. We can be fundamentally—genetically—different (indeed we are) but still have equal treatment and equal rights. This is even practical, since the most accurate and the only fair test of native ability is equal opportunity under the law.

Writers such as Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin will continue to deny the mounting evidence for important biological influences on behavior. In the meantime, a broad spectrum of dedicated investigators is continuing to pursue that will-o'-the-wisp, the truth of the matter. Harrison Pope and Joseph Lipinsky at the McLean Psychiatric Hospital are finding that one of the best predictors of responsiveness to lithium in people who have had psychotic breaks is a family history of affective disorder. Howard Gardner of the Harvard

School of Education, relying on evidence ranging from brain damage in veterans to creativity in children, is developing a new theory of human intelligence consistent with knowledge of brain function. Albert Galaburda and Norman Geschwind of the Harvard Medical School have identified a subgroup of individuals with reading disability (dyslexia) who have distortions of brain architecture in a region known to be involved in the act of reading. Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, of the Max Planck Institute for Behavioral Physiology, is traveling to the remotest corners of the world to document on film—in the Tasaday, the Yanomamö, the Bushmen, and other peoples—universals of behavior and communication that are grounded in human biology. Paul Sherman, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, and hundreds of other students of animal behavior are testing principles of sociobiology empirically, while social scientists such as Alice Rossi and Robin Fox explore the applicability of these principles to human social life in various cultures.

To be sure, such investigators (myself included) are influenced by some of the ideologies of the times—as Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin are by others. We are doing the best we can to stay aware of our biases and to move the frontier of knowledge slowly forward. Most of us do not subscribe to extravagant claims, cited by these authors, predicting that biological explanations will replace the rest of behavioral and social science. Most are non-ideologists, and some have personal political views remarkably close to those of the authors of this book.

Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin are brilliant figures in their respective fields who have, in this unfortunate book, devoted themselves to demolition instead of construction. They have attacked only the weakest points in the rising scientific edifice of behavioral biology, while resorting to innuendo and specious analogy to tar its builders with one or another ideological brush. They explicitly reject the extreme of cultural determinism as well as that of biological determinism, but they offer little, except for pious hand-wringing and "dialectical" rhetoric, that might help us to grapple with the great unanswered questions of our behavior and experience, normal and abnormal. How gratifying it would be if they now turned their talents to studies of human action and its causes.

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