

An Unevolved View of Gender Evolution

By MELVIN KONNER

FULL DISCLOSURE: My latest book defends the main viewpoint excoriated by Mari Ruti in *The Age of Scientific Sexism*: that the differences between men and women, especially in violence and sexuality, are partly due to genetics and physiology, and result from evolution.

Luckily for me, Louise Lamphere, one of the founders of feminist anthropology, called my work “a lively, readable feminist book.” Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, the leading evolutionary anthropologist of her generation, called it “the best available examination of how men and women differ and how 21st-century humans can use this knowledge to forge a better world.”

Have these two prominent scholars somehow missed the well-known criticisms of this approach that Mari Ruti recycles in her relentless assault? No.

Ruti is not an evolutionary biologist, a psychologist, or an anthropologist, but a “critical theorist.” Fine, but does that give you license to say whatever you please? Ruti reaches back to the 1970s to find unwise remarks by E.O. Wilson and critiques of them by self-described Marxists like Richard Lewontin; devotes a whole first chapter to slamming a 1994 book by Robert Wright, who is a journalist, not a scientist; and spends all of Chapter 4 on *Sex at Dawn*, a breezy best seller promoting female desire and polyamory, by a psychologist and a psychiatrist, neither of whom claims scientific credentials.

More justifiably, she criticizes popular books by two evolutionary psychologists, David Buss and Geoffrey Miller, for simplifying their findings and stereotyping the sexes. She delves a bit into Buss’s actual research (as published in refereed journals), on what we look for in mates. There she finds him nuanced; there is more variation within each sex and among cultures than between women and men. But it doesn’t impress her that in 37 cultures, men on average are more interested in looks and women on average more interested in status when choosing a partner.

I emphasize “on average” because Ruti doesn’t seem to understand that research generalizations about behavior or biology are probabilistic, not categorical. Buss’s reported differences between the sexes are highly statistically significant and have been replicated often. To some of us, the fact that they go the same way in so many different cultures suggests that culture is not the only determinant of mate choice. Ruti is free to dissent from that widely accepted interpretation, but not to condemn a whole research enterprise as mere stereotyping and sexist backlash with minimal reference to the actual studies.

Evolutionary psychology and sociobiology are today what is called normal science. No longer upstart disciplines, they guide much research.

As Ruti notes, “Since 2000, scientific journals have published more than 30,000 articles on the differences between women and men.” These are motivated by various paradigms; most do not involve biology, but thousands do, with lenses as varied as neuroscience, genetics, hormones, and yes, evolution.

In animal and human behavior, evolutionary theory works. It doesn’t explain everything, but it explains some things, and the real research, which Ruti largely ignores, is frank about its limits.

IT IS FINE to critique popular books, including ones by scientists, but not to let those works stand for a discipline and its influence. Subatomic physics is not vitiated by the atom bomb, and heredity is a valid concept despite a century of popular abuse. A critical theorist might have focused on the often-dubious ways that good research on sex differences gets mistranslated, occasionally by scientists, into media simplifications. But Ruti condemns the science itself without describing it.

Hrdy is mentioned as debunking the coy-female myth, but nowhere do we learn that she accepts sexual selection as a powerful force. There is no reference to the primatologist Barbara Smuts, whose research on sex and friendship in baboons and on male violence against females is squarely in the evolutionary paradigm. Helen Fisher is cited, but we don’t learn that she, like me, thinks that biologically based sex differences are an argument for advancing women, not for keeping them down.

Ruti relies on Joan Roughgarden’s *Evolution’s Rainbow* and on books by Anne Fausto-Sterling for scientific critiques of evolutionary approaches. Better to read those authors, but not without a grain of salt. Of *Evolution’s Rainbow*, Hrdy wrote in *Nature*, “Competition between those of one sex for reproductive access to the other remains a robust explanatory framework, even though it is not the whole story,” and Alison Jolly, another pioneering primatologist, wrote in *Science*, “What Darwinian theory needs is not so much radical revision as a simple expansion to take sexual diversity much more seriously.”

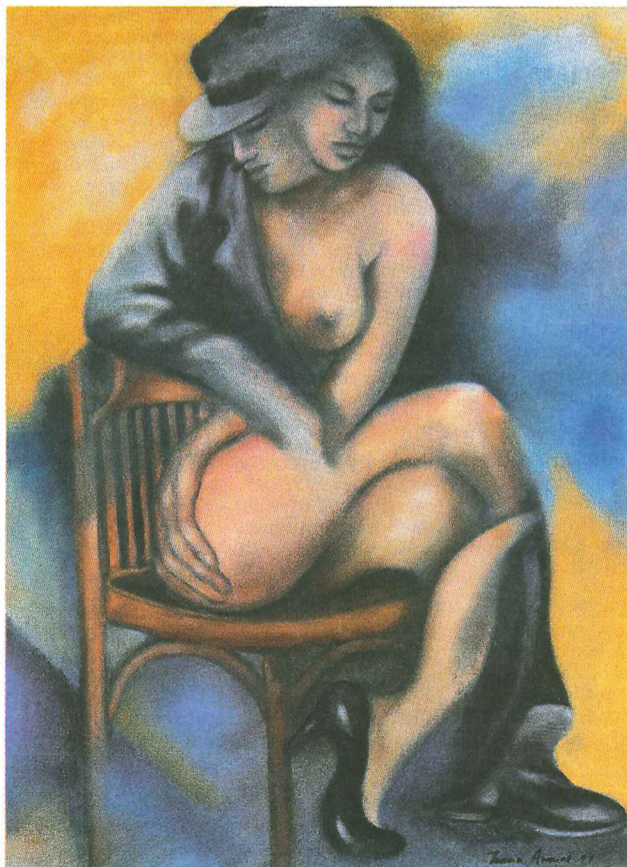
An example of Ruti’s rhetoric: When teaching Harvard undergraduates, she sometimes shared students with E.O. Wilson. The students would say that sex is the same thing as reproduction — which, I can pretty much guarantee, they did not hear from Wilson. She responded with questions: “So, when you’re having your 3 a.m. hookup at Winthrop House, are you trying to produce a baby?” “Why do you think so many American women spend much of their lives on the pill, despite the unpleasant side effects?” “You don’t seriously think that two gay men getting it on are hoping that a child will follow, do you?” A one-sentence paragraph follows: “I rest my case.”

I consider Ruti to be doctrinaire, rude, poorly informed about science, and cavalier in her criticism, but I don’t think she’s stupid. Therefore this “case” must represent willful ignorance. Even those undergraduates could have told her that her questions revealed a complete confusion of ultimate with proximate causes, unconscious with conscious motives, evolutionary with psychological explanation. Those questions do not present the slightest difficulty to anyone who understands evolutionary theory, much less make a case against it. Rather, they reveal a basic lack of understanding.

Not all sex differences are as subtle as those that Buss delineates. In all cultures, men commit most homicides and almost all rapes. Gay men have far more sexual partners than lesbians do, without “the battle of the sexes.” Far more men than women pay for sex, whoever is selling. Men and women predominate in different mental illnesses. The chance that all this can be explained by culture alone is near zero.

Books like this will continue to be written, stating the obvious. Most men are not violent. Most women have healthy sex drives. Men can be coy, women forward. But to understand sex differences in behavior, we have to take evolution and biology into account — at some level, in some ways. Books that grossly simplify and denigrate that effort are just as damaging as books that grossly simplify and exaggerate its importance. Cartoons on either side may be clever, they may even cancel each other out — but they don’t advance understanding. ■

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Maria Amaral, “Nostalgia,” 1991, © Adagp, Paris, 2016

REVIEW

The Age of Scientific Sexism

By Mari Ruti
(Bloomsbury Academic)