

Selective Witness to a Century of Biology and Culture

Hiram Caton

In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought by Carl N. Degler. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 400 pages, hc, \$24.95.

This study is the author's valedictory as a Stanford University emeritus in history. The autobiographical Preface places the work in the author's life history. Although born to a "world that soon made me a racist and a sexist," he rejected "both race and sex as explanations of differences in the behavior of human beings," as did "most well-educated people of that generation." Even as a young activist he opposed biological explanations of human behavior, fortified in the conviction that he was "defending a truth as solidly established as the heliocentric universe." As a professional historian he devoted much of his career to exposing the supposed fallacies of biological explanations of race and sex, winning a Pulitzer Prize along the way.

The book retraces this life history by describing the reasons that biological explanations came to be repudiated in American social science (the watershed, we learn, was the Thirties) after an initial phase of acceptance. The conviction prevails today among the enlightened that "human beings, in their social behavior, alone among animals, have succeeded in escaping biology" (p. viii). But there is a snare. The enlightened accept that the human species evolved from animals in the Darwinian manner; and Darwin described many homologies between human and primate behavior. The enlightened might have gone on indefinitely in this unresolved mental condition, but for the recent revival of Darwinian explanations by sociobiologists and others. Does this mean that the monsters slain during the New Deal are once again on the prowl?

Fortunately not. The new Darwinians leave the repudiated ideas of racism, sexism, and eugenics in their graves, and they do not propose to order society according to supposed biological hierarchies. "Social Darwinism was definitely killed, not merely scotched," we are assured (p. ix). The revival consists instead of an effort to understand how human beings "fit into that framework which Darwin laid down...." This tame

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characterization seems to be a conciliatory gesture toward contemporary Darwinians; it also helps to avoid facing a renewed onslaught against the certainties that Degler takes to be historically definitive.

But a renewed onslaught it is—according to contemporary anti-Darwinians. They hold that the temper of the new Darwinism is deterministic, and that its findings are racist, sexist, and elitist in tenor, whatever the intentions of its exponents may be. It is further reproached as illiberal, antihumanistic, and stultifying in the limits it sets to human potential. Of today's numerous culture wars, this is perhaps the most bitterly contested, not because the Darwinians are numerous, but because equality supporters deploy the menace of biological explanations of sex and race difference as a foil to articulate the reasons for grass roots resistance to social transformations. This controversy, and its implications for contemporary society are given scant notice by the author.

In this vein one may also remark that Degler's one-nation focus introduces an unfortunate bias. The gallant knights who defeated wicked Darwinism in the Thirties were conscious that theirs was an international movement embracing democrats, humanists, communists, the religious of many persuasions. They needed a common cause and found it in the war against Fascism. What are the outcomes fifty years after?

The Soviet experiment in equality created a ranked, patrimonial regime based on a combination of patronage, secret police coercion, and merit. The nationalities problem, which Lenin thought could be resolved by assimilation, reverted to the Czarist strategy of subordinating all nationalities to the hegemony of the Rus. Seven decades of comprehensive social conditioning and episodic genocide failed to obliterate ethnic differences or religious belief and did not inculcate socialist altruistic solidarity. In other words, the experiment failed every crucial test. The experiments in China and Israel are likewise failures. This evidence is relevant to evaluating the American experiment with equality; but for that, one requires a comparative approach that articulates the ideology of emancipation into a long period of rapid cultural change and all-sided innovation. That is not Degler's cup of tea.

He has written a doxography, a compendium of beliefs and debates about human nature from George Romanes' generation to the present. The disciplines principally covered are anthropology and psychology. After an opening section describing the biological premises of those two disciplines under the tutelage of Francis Galton, Herbert Spencer, and the like, Degler moves to the core of the book, a long section entitled "The Sovereignty of Culture." It describes the acceptance of the behaviorist (Watsonian) paradigm in psychology; criticisms of the measurement of intelligence by psychologists and sundry others; criticisms of the concept of instinct and animal mind; and the founding of cultural anthropology by the Boasians as a discipline committed in principle to the exclusion of biological variables. These movements have been previously described by other historians. I do not detect here the identification of any new sources or ideas. Striking by its absence is any attention to the models developed by psychologists, where quantitative methods and experimental design were of paramount importance. Nevertheless, this 150 page section is a readable and illuminating rendering of the attitudes and opinions that came to dominate American social science. One must commend Degler for his candor in declaring that scientific issues and questions of fact were not the primary driving force for the establishment of the cultural paradigm. It would have prevailed (as it prevails today) against much more potent scientific evidence because it was and is driven by an ideal of

self-realization in which biological causality is unwanted because it places constraints on the capacity for self-improvement.

The revival of Darwinism is described in another long section, entitled "Biology Redivivus." It might have commenced with a discussion of post-war neurology, or genetics, or endocrinology, or ethology. Instead it begins with a discussion of Gunnar Myrdal's comprehensive study of race, *An American Dilemma* (1944), commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation. Why this beginning? Degler has previously explained that the race problem was a powerful impetus to the cultural paradigm. If biological explanations were allowed in social science, they might promote a social perception that the condition of blacks was irremediable. Myrdal strongly endorsed social sciences freed from biological explanation, praised their "ingenious research methods," and hailed their revolutionary spirit of reform. Degler quotes the declaration with which Myrdal concluded his study: "We have today in social science a greater trust in the improvability of man and society than we have ever had since the Enlightenment [commenced]." Degler draws from this quotation the comment that it "can stand as the epitome of the transformation of the social sciences" since Franz Boas.

He leaves unsaid that such optimism about social science as a tool of improvement is scarcely in evidence today. In particular, social science-inspired remedies to lift the achievement of American blacks have not scored gains satisfactory to any one, despite prolonged effort and lavish funding. The black middle class, to be sure, has expanded, and color bars have fallen. But the ghetto syndrome continues to hold half of the black population in its grip.

Degler dates the new phase of Darwinism from 1946 when the Jackson Biological Laboratory sponsored a conference on Genetics and Social Behavior. Papers were delivered by leading psychologists including Karl Lashley, Robert Yerkes, and T. C. Schneirla. All emphasized the importance of hereditary influences on behavior. Twin studies of intelligence were rehabilitated. The expulsion of instinct from psychology was deemed to have been premature and the behaviorist paradigm was roundly criticized. One participant declared that recent psychological research was compatible with the view that "human nature is nine-tenths inborn" (p. 218).

From here the scene shifts to the inner sanctum of the Boasian faith, where we find Clyde Kluckhohn, Alfred Kroeber, Margaret Mead, W. C. Allee, and Earl Count now advocating establishment of "fundamental links between biology and the social sciences" (p. 221). Ethology was the lead field for Count's 1951 essay, "The Biological Basis of Human Sociality," which introduced the term "biogram" to denote adaptive sensory-motor programs. Degler identifies Harry Harlow's maternal deprivation experiments on rhesus monkeys as another watershed. Harlow's 1958 presidential address to the American Psychological Association argued that the infant monkey's behavior could not be explained by the conditioning paradigm since it displayed a complex unlearned response.

The revival of instinct Degler properly attributes to ethologists Niko Tinbergen, Karl von Frisch, and Konrad Lorenz. The Sixties were the decade of ethology. Lorenz's *On Aggression* appeared in English translation in 1966 and produced a sensation for its assertions that aggression is innate and socially adaptive in all species except the human species equipped with modern weaponry. The amateur scholar, Robert Ardrey, published *African Genesis* (1961) and the *Territorial Imperative* (1966), which made a deep impression on Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, who themselves published the pathbreakers,

Men in Groups and *The Imperial Animal*. Desmond Morris's best-seller, *The Naked Ape*, appeared in 1967.

Degler offers no commentary on the popular success of these writings. The reason is not far to seek. Those were years when the cry "Burn, Baby, Burn!" rose from the ashes of black rioting in most large American cities. Then there was chronic war. Over eighty million lives had already been lost in this century's conflicts and a nasty war was underway in Vietnam. Presidential commissions given the task of discovering the causes of violence could come up with nothing more convincing than the Social Deprivation and Frustration-Aggression hypotheses, which mirrored the prevailing paradigm that all behavior is reactive to other behavior. On this showing, females should be equal participants in riots and wars, whereas the evidence was that the participants in urban riots were about 85 percent young males, mostly with arrest records. Primeval forces were at work, and ethologists seemed to tap that level of motivation. I will not follow Degler's narrative of the rise of sociobiology in the milieu of the then current wave of liberation, feminism. Let me comment instead on some notable omissions from his story.

Observers have often noted that disembodied social science expresses the hostility to the human body and to animal life that is deeply entrenched in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The core of Judeo-Christian theology, divine omnipotence, was transferred to Man by the Enlightenment. The individualist version of the central thought is captured by J. S. Mill's dictum, "over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign." The environmental movement was the first popular secular challenge to the concept of human world mastery, setting in its place a notion of harmonious interaction of the global ecosystem. The stigma that secular humanism had placed on nature was removed and transferred to the "chauvinistic" will to dominate nature. Human power, symbolized by the atomic bomb, was seen to be Malevolent whereas Nature was Beneficent. Plants and animals were no longer exploitable dumb matter but beings enjoying inherent dignity and even "equal rights" with human beings. Thus the environmentalist movement undermined the moral aversion to animals implicit in the proud claim that the human species had somehow found a loophole in the fabric of evolution.

The flower children also discovered a marvellous efficacy in plants—the hallucinogens—that opened to them doors of experience completely unsuspected by their "uptight" parents. They learned that hallucinogens had been used in many cultures as a gate to spirituality, whereas Western culture had suppressed this practice in the interest of domination. This was an additional stimulus to the rehabilitation of the primitive as an integral element of culture.

In deserting the culture of dominance, the flower children took with them one product, the contraceptive pill, which freed their simulation of the primitive from its natural consequences. The pill is a major signifier in the nature-nurture debate. It is a reminder that customs governing human reproduction are rooted in biological conditions, yet it is a technology for partially liberating sexual expression from those conditions. For Darwinians, the pill was the means for achieving world population control, which was deemed to be indispensable for a peaceful world order. The "population bomb" was a dramatic metaphor that placed Social Darwinism back on the public agenda. If humankind did not exercise rational triage, winnowing our own offspring, nature was sure to do it for us through war and catastrophic population crashes. The forceful advocacy of abortion as a population control measure shows that triage does indeed involve killing. The current

figure is 30 million per year. Euthanasia, which now enjoys significant support, is of course another triage principle.

Wherever you find Social Darwinism, eugenics cannot be far away. The resurgence of eugenics came with the discovery of recombinant DNA and its vast potential for engineering domestic plants, animals, and a host of medical products. In the late Sixties senior geneticists quite openly canvassed the prospects for the application of genetic engineering to the creation of "superman" sometime in the future. Behind the media hype lay the fact that eugenics had been quietly installed in clinical services. Genetic counselling, the detection of birth defects in utero, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and now lately genetic engineering constitute the armamentarium of the new eugenics. A number of recent studies, notably Daniel Kevles' *In the Name of Eugenics*, show that the eugenic idea is deeply entrenched in clinical medicine and related sciences. Some leading clinicians predict that three or four decades hence, no handicapped infants will pass through the "rigorous selection" of modern birthing.

There is much more that Degler leaves out of his account. There is no discussion of post-war advances in the study of IQ and the controversies it occasioned. Arthur Jensen is mentioned only in a footnote. The Minnesota Twin Studies are not mentioned at all. No notice is taken of J. Philippe Rushton's fusion of behavior genetics, kin selection theory, and abilities testing into a theoretical tool for measuring race differences in behavior. The diffusion of sociobiology into anthropology, and the application of sociobiological theory to an array of social problems, such as child abuse, rape, violent crime, and suicide goes unremarked. Particularly grievous, in view of Degler's focus on anthropology, is the want of any mention of the debate over the legacy of Margaret Mead and the Boasian paradigm instigated by Derek Freeman's 1983 refutation of Mead's most influential study. This is an unpardonable omission in a book purporting to be a history considering those debates extensively canvassed the very history of anthropology that Degler covers.

The suggestive title of the Epilogue is "Beyond Social Science." Alas, it does not keep its implied promise to explain why the cultural paradigm is exhausted. The fundamental flaw is its incapacity to demonstrate causality on the individual or social aggregate levels. It accordingly supports only interpretative studies, not science. This approach is widely accepted today among anthropologists and sociologists. No particular embarrassment follows from this modest claim so long as no explanatory science is available. But there is now an abundance of explanatory methods applicable to every aspect of contemporary social problems. Since the warrant for public funding of interpretative social science is its claim to understand the causality involved in these problems, with a view to finding solutions, the credibility of the social sciences is seriously at risk.

Pressed in this way, some social scientists take shelter in that last refuge of failed paradigms, relativism. At the operational level, they embrace legally mandated equality measures as a substitute for thought. This is the democratic version of Lysenkoism. Lysenkoism in genetics was eventually discarded because it could not feed the hungry. It got causality wrong. The culture paradigm in the social sciences will also pass because it too is impotent in the real world, where culture is thoroughly integrated with natural processes. The "sovereignty of culture" will one day be ranked among the superstitions of modern times.