

SOCIOBIOLOGY FOR LIBERALS

The Blank Slate:

The Modern Denial of Human Nature

Steven Pinker

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Reviewed by Jared Taylor

For the last half of the previous century, it was common—sometimes obligatory—to believe there is no such thing as human nature, that men are “blank slates” on which society can write any message it chooses. It was widely believed that humans are born essentially equal, with almost no predispositions or inherent abilities, and that behavior was almost entirely controlled by rearing and environment.

Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate*, which takes its name from that theory, purports to be an introduction to new findings that support an older view, that human beings are born with differing abilities but the same general characteristics, and that all societies are built upon and reflect these characteristics. There is, in other words, such a thing as human nature, which largely dictates our social arrangements rather than the other way around, and that men (and women) are not born equal. *The Blank Slate* also offers to explain why so many people denied this for so many decades, and why they resorted to every trick to suppress and discredit those whose research contradicted their view.

This book does these things to some degree, but its real purpose is not to explain the discoveries of science but to instruct us what to think about them. It begins by leaving out a great deal—the entire field of racial differences, for example—and goes on to lather what science it does present in layers of moralizing, hand-holding, reassurances, and apologies. Steven Pinker, who teaches psychology at MIT, has therefore written a book that is polemic masquerading as science. It is perhaps one-tenth science, eight-tenths spin, and

one-tenth blather. Prof. Pinker writes altogether like a man who does not trust his readers to think for themselves, and in offering to do their thinking for them, tries to uphold the liberal doctrines that were erected on the very blank-slate assumptions he is attacking.

This is the perfect book for liberals who have heard unpleasant rumors that what they have always pretended to believe about human nature is wrong, but who are dying to be told they can go on being liberals anyway, and this no doubt explains why the book has been well received. On balance, we should welcome any book that acknowledges the deep, biological roots of human behavior, but it is hard to be enthusiastic about an author so given to preaching.

Prof. Pinker begins his book with what reads almost like an apology for the progress of science. "To acknowledge human nature, many think, is to endorse racism, sexism, war, greed, genocide, nihilism, reactionary politics, and neglect of children and the disadvantaged," he writes, but assures us that "acknowledging human nature...does not, for example, require one to abandon feminism, or to accept current levels of inequality or violence...." He adds it is now clear humans cannot be perfectly and infinitely molded by society, but "I will show how the passing of the Blank Slate is less disquieting, and in some ways less revolutionary, than it first appears." In other words, even if the basic assumptions of virtually every social movement and uplift program of the last fifty years are wrong, we need not change our politics or our policies.

THE LEFT AND THE BLANK SLATE

It is clear why the left so loved the idea that people are blank slates: They were dying to write on them. The idea of remaking people, of bossing them around for their own good, is the fundamental impulse of liberalism, and the left gloried in the idea that human abilities and personalities could be putty in its hands. If environmental intervention could make people into anything at all, people who could force the right environment upon us could create utopia. For the left, utopia means equality, and the politics of the blank-slate movement were openly socialist.

Prof. Pinker rightly recognizes the importance of Franz Boas in establishing the doctrine of human plasticity. "I claim," wrote Boas, "that, unless the contrary can be proved, we must assume that all complex activities are socially determined, not hereditary." Boas' students pushed his views even farther. Margaret Mead wrote, "human nature is the rawest, most undifferentiated of raw material." Otto Klineberg wrote that the environmental explanation for behavior was always preferable "because it was more optimistic, holding out the hope of improvement."

Prof. Pinker recognizes that zeal for "improvement" has led to the worst mass killings in human history. He concedes that the French Revolution and the communist slaughter in China, Cambodia, and the

Soviet Union were all driven by power-mad leftists who wanted to write exciting, new messages on the blank slate. "Inborn human desires are a nuisance," he writes, "to those with utopian and totalitarian visions, which often amount to the same thing."

In the non-communist West, the blank-slate theory has been most vigorously pushed by people fighting "racism" and "sexism," and they have the same power-hungry fervor as communist revolutionaries. On the question of whether women should stay home with their children, Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1975 that "women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one." Betty Friedan wanted "compulsory preschool" for two-year-olds so as to be able to stuff them full of feminist thought as early as possible. In the name of combating "racism" and "sexism," American law now forbids freedom of association in all but the most private settings, but as we shall see, Prof. Pinker has no objection to this.

What, though, are the findings that have finally discredited the view that people are blank slates? Prof. Pinker summarizes the evidence competently but offers few surprises to anyone who has followed the field even from a distance. One kind of research shows that all human societies are built on universal human traits, and another suggests that individual differences are innate. In the former category, Prof. Pinker includes an appendix listing hundreds of characteristics common to all human societies, even the most isolated. Some of the obvious ones are sex role differences, consciousness of in-group and out-group, territoriality, status rankings, the incest taboo, a conception of right and wrong, and distinctions between close and distant kin. Anthropologists have also found that all people celebrate marriage, respect generosity, have taboo foods, decorate the body, dance, cry, suck wounds, use language to deceive, have meal times, and prefer to copulate in private. These things are not coincidences. Society reflects human nature. Even monkeys have complex patterns of behavior that demonstrate jealousy, peace-making, reciprocity, and clear sex differences.

For years, anthropologists tried to argue that warfare was mostly a white man's disease and not a universal trait. Also, in order to suggest colonization could not have had a civilizing mission, they played down the savagery of primitive peoples whom they tried to portray as noble savages. However, as Prof. Pinker explains, the fiction of the peace-loving forest-dweller has been impossible to sustain:

[N]ative peoples are dead serious when they carry out warfare. Many of them make weapons as damaging as their technologies permit, exterminate their enemies when they can get away with it, and enhance the experience by torturing captives, cutting off trophies, and feasting on enemy flesh.

War and violence are part of human nature, and that nature is often at its rawest among the primitives.

Prof. Pinker argues that complicated, built-in behavior is necessary for survival, and that in this respect humans are no different from animals. Without instinctive jealousy, men will rear children not their own. Without an instinct to defend their interests—with violence if need be—they will be dispossessed. Likewise, Prof. Pinker adds, “[I]f our minds were truly malleable they would be easily manipulated by our rivals, who could mold or condition us into serving their needs rather than our own.”

Prof. Pinker spends a number of pages arguing that the structure of the brain itself suggests humans are designed for certain kinds of behavior rather than others. This material is often tedious and hardly crucial to his point of view, but he does offer some interesting observations. When deaf people use sign language, they use the same part of the brain people use when they talk, which suggests this area (the superior gyrus of the temporal lobe) is built to handle the processes of speech. The brain, in that sense, is not a blank slate. It is also well known that amputees feel sensations in their “phantom limbs,” but Prof. Pinker reports that people who are born without limbs have the same sensations. One girl solved math problems by counting on fingers she never had. This, too, suggests the brain is put together to do specific things, not simply to absorb instructions from the environment.

As for the evidence that individual differences are inborn, Prof. Pinker replows the well-worked ground of twin and adoption studies to explain that intelligence levels and personality appear to be unaffected by “shared environment,” that is to say the conditions parents provide in their homes and that are shared by siblings. Parents can influence their children to some degree while they are still young, but as soon as they become independent they find environments that suit their genetic propensities and the influence of their rearing environment dwindles close to zero.

Heredity appears to account for about 50 percent of most personality traits (the figure is probably somewhat higher for intelligence), with the rest, by definition, influenced by environment. There is still disagreement among experts as to how environment works its effects, but Prof. Pinker believes it is a combination of chance events, perinatal shock and childhood diseases, and—most important—the influence of childhood playmates. The importance of peer group is unproven, but Prof. Pinker makes a strong case for the view that children are constantly trying to fit into the society of children, not of adults, and therefore model themselves more on other children than on their parents.

Although he does not seem very comfortable with the evidence—perhaps because of its implications for racial differences—Prof. Pinker concedes that criminality is at least partly heritable, and notes that psychopaths were often refractory, cruel children.

SOCIOBIOLOGY

The publication in 1975 of *Sociobiology* by E. O. Wilson marked perhaps the most important turning point in the return to a more realistic view of human nature, and it sent the blank-slate school into a screeching rage. It had already shown its closed-mindedness when anthropologist Paul Ekman reported in the late 1960s that human facial expressions are the same worldwide, even among isolated primitives. This hint of innateness was, according to Margaret Mead, “outrageous,” “appalling,” and “a disgrace.” Others called it fascist.

As Prof. Pinker explains, “The discoveries about human nature were greeted with fear and loathing because they were thought to threaten progressive ideals.” If *anything at all* was found to be innate, there was no telling what else might be impervious to busybody uplift artists. And this was why the left loosed such a blast against E.O. Wilson.

In 1976, the American Anthropological Association came close to passing a vote to censure *Sociobiology* and to cancel two symposia on it. Steven Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin wrote that the study of sociobiology provided the intellectual basis for “the establishment of gas chambers in Nazi Germany.” These two, together with the British neuroscientist Steven Rose, became, in Prof. Pinker’s words, “the intellectual vanguard of the radical science movement.” They wrote that they shared “a commitment to the prospect of a more socially just—a socialist—society,” and saw “critical science as an integral part of the struggle to create that society.” Prof. Lewontin, for example, claimed that “each of us, irrespective of race, class, or sex, can develop virtually any identity that lies within the human ambit,” and rejected the limitations of heredity. As co-authors, the three misquoted their intellectual opponent Richard Dawkins on five different occasions, saying he wrote genes “control us, body and mind,” whereas what he really wrote was that they “created us, body and mind.”

Prof. Pinker might have drawn on a very thorough 2000 book, *Defenders of the Truth*, about the fight to suppress *Sociobiology*. The author, Ullica Segerstråle, does an excellent job of describing the state of mind of the defenders of the blank slate. Prof. Lewontin, for example, was convinced that researchers whose ideas he opposed were just as politically motivated as he and could not believe they were not twisting science in order to promote all the hated “isms.” He agreed with fellow lefty psychologist Leon Kamin that scientists “sometimes tell deliberate lies” in order to advance larger political purposes. With co-author Richard Levins he was even capable of writing, “As working scientists in the field of evolutionary genetics and ecology, we have been attempting with some success to guide our own research by a conscious application of Marxist philosophy.” He even once cheerfully admitted that his criticism of Prof. Wilson was deliberately “nasty,” because the political stakes were so high.

One would think it an embarrassment for “scientists” to glory in their political biases, but because their politics are the politics of our time, it serves to prove their virtue rather than destroy their credibility. Prof. Pinker notes that anthropologist Leslie Sponsel, for example, claims to want an “anthropology of peace” that will promote a “more nonviolent and peaceful world,” which he thinks is “latent in human nature.” He confesses to “an almost automatic reaction against any biological explanation of human behavior.” This is an admission that he cannot do objective science, yet men like him are not run out of the profession.

RACE AND SEX

Prof. Pinker is at his most annoying when he discusses race and sex. He concedes that as the blank slate became popular, “the prevailing theories of mind were refashioned to make racism and sexism as untenable as possible,” but even though “racism” and “sexism” were vanquished with the help of bad science and even outright lies it was still a “well-deserved victory.” How can this be? He offers separate defenses for the assaults on “racism” and “sexism,” both equally bad. There are, he concedes, important inborn differences between men and women but “sexism,” whatever that is, is still wrong because it’s—well—wrong. “Racism,” whatever that is, is wrong because there are no significant biological differences between the races, but even if there were it would still be—well—wrong.

They are wrong because “no one likes being treated unfairly, that is, according to traits that the person cannot control.” This may be the stupidest argument in the book. Prof. Pinker would agree that athletic ability, beauty, musical talent, intelligence, and personality are largely inherited, yet people routinely treat others differently on account of them and few complain that it’s “unfair.” If race and sex carry real meaning, they are not “unfair” reasons for discrimination either.

Prof. Pinker has made the argument against “sexism” more difficult for himself by admitting the sexes are different. He concedes parents might prefer to hire a woman rather than a man as a nanny, on the assumption that a woman would be less likely to molest their children. And yet, “it would be reprehensible for a bank to hire a man over a woman as a manager for the reason that he is less likely to quit after having a child.” Reprehensible? Companies want employees who will not quit in a year or two, and until the law prohibited it, they routinely discriminated against women for that very reason. Prof. Pinker replies as follows:

The point is not that group differences may *never* be used as a basis for discrimination. The point is that they do not have to be used that way, and sometimes we can decide on moral grounds that they must not be used that way.

These “moral grounds” are a rabbit out of a hat. Most of the time, Prof. Pinker tries to argue out his conclusions, but these “moral grounds” appear from nowhere and with no justification. He seems to be telling us that now that we know men and women are not identical, a little discrimination is OK, but not too much. He will no doubt tell us when we have gone too far and erred on “moral grounds.” Elsewhere, Prof. Pinker complains of the leftist “temptation to overmoralize matters of judgment;” it is clear that he is, himself, guilty of “overmoralizing.”

Occasionally, Prof. Pinker actually flirts with the logic of human nature before scurrying off to “moral grounds”: “If races or sexes are different on average, racial profiling or gender stereotyping would be actuarially sound, and it would be naïve to expect information about race and sex not to be used for prejudicial ends.” Of course, if there are differences, discrimination is not “for prejudicial ends.” When an actuary charges higher life insurance premiums to smokers, it is sound business practice, not “prejudice.”

Ultimately, Prof. Pinker’s position is pure assertion. At one point he announces that “people’s stereotypes are generally consistent with the statistics, and in many cases their bias is to *underestimate* the real differences between sexes or ethnic groups.” Yet he hastens to add, “the partial accuracy of many stereotypes [now their accuracy is only “partial”] does not, of course, mean that racism, sexism, and ethnic prejudice are acceptable.” Why not? Because Prof. Pinker says they are not.

When it comes to sex differences, Prof. Pinker refuses to face the facts he admits are true. With race, he simply denies the facts: “[A]ny biological differences are minor at most and scientifically uninteresting.” In the meantime, he insists that racial differences in historical achievement are due to “the vicissitudes of geography and ecology” and have nothing to do with intelligence. “The ‘culture’ of any of the conquering nations of Europe, such as Britain,” he explains, “is in fact a greatest-hits collection of inventions assembled across thousands of miles and years.” But if Europeans are just copiers, why can’t the equally intelligent Africans copy just as well?

Prof. Pinker recites the mantra about how closely related the races are, and although he has told us that in the animal kingdom “small differences in the genes can lead to large differences in behavior,” he fails to apply this insight to humans. He trots out another standby—that there is more genetic variation within races than between them—and tells us “these are reassuring findings.” Reassuring? Scientific data are “reassuring” only for those who cannot approach them objectively and whose prejudices ride on the outcome. In any case the “variation” argument is a con job. The difference in arm strength between the weakest and the strongest man is much greater than the difference in arm strength between the average man and the average woman. This does

not change the fact that men on average are considerably stronger than women, and all societies take this for granted. As evidence against racial differences, the “variation” argument is almost deliberately obtuse.

In the end Prof. Pinker prefers to hedge his bets on race, admitting that group differences in intelligence and personality are possible. “This is not to say,” he adds, “that such genetic differences are expected or that we have evidence for them, only that they are biologically possible.”

Why this concession after so much dogmatism? Philippe Rushton is in Prof. Pinker’s bibliography, and he even cites Arthur Jensen’s *The g Factor* when it suits him (on the similarity of male/female IQ distribution curves), so he is not completely unaware of the literature on race differences. At some level he probably realizes further study of the human genome will turn up racial differences in the distributions of genes for intelligence. “So,” he asks, “could discoveries in biology turn out to justify racism and sexism? Absolutely not.”

What he is doing is preparing the same incoherent argument about race that he has already advanced for sex. He concedes that the intellectual basis for the battle against “sexism”—that there were no important inherent differences between men and women—was a fraud, but he still wants the battle to continue. Likewise the battle against “racism” must continue no matter what the scientists tell us. He distinguishes his enlightened liberalism from that of the past:

Once they [the blank-slate socialists] staked themselves to the lazy argument that racism, sexism, war, and political inequality were factually incorrect because there is no such thing as human nature (as opposed to being despicable regardless of the details of human nature), every discovery about human beings was, by their own reasoning, tantamount to saying that those scourges were not so bad after all.

At least the blank-slate types were logical: They said there was no justification for treating people differently because people are all the same. Prof. Pinker admits people are different but wants us to *act* as if they are the same. In this respect the “radical” scientists got it right and Prof. Pinker got it wrong. If science tells us blacks are, on average, less intelligent, more violent, more libidinous, and more psychopathic than whites, the traditional disinclination of whites to live among them or send their children to school with them is justified.

Early in the book, Prof. Pinker writes, “the taboo against human nature has left us playing without a full deck as we deal with the pressing issues confronting us.” Indeed, it has. Prof. Pinker leaves the greatest taboo untouched and appears happy to let us blunder along in our willful blindness about race. For example, he complains in two separate passages about “racial inequities that put too many African American men in prison.” But what if the biology of blacks explains high crime rates? Because of “taboos against human nature,” Prof. Pinker would prefer to leave us “without a full deck” and to go beating the bushes for “racial inequities.”

Prof. Pinker writes sympathetically about the abuse, death threats, and dishonest criticism that greeted sociobiologists in the early days, but he is silent on the even worse treatment meted out to Arthur Jensen, William Shockley, Philippe Rushton, and Michael Levin. Perhaps he thinks anyone who studies race deserves it.

OTHER OBJECTIONS

The sound of constant political ax-grinding is not the only thing that grates on readers of this book. Prof. Pinker's editor let him ramble and repeat himself and go on about all manner of irrelevant pet ideas. Why must we plod through musings about whether language is the same thing as thought, how image differs from reality, whether the Superfund Act was good law, whether Malthus was right about population and resources, when a fertilized egg becomes a person, and why a consumption tax is better than an income tax? There is a completely useless chapter on art, as well as lengthy, contrasting quotations from novels that illustrate both the blank-slate view and an understanding of human nature. Half this book should be pruned away.

Nor does Prof. Pinker deliver everything he promises. "I will retrace the history that led people to see human nature as a dangerous idea, and I will try to unsnarl the moral and political rat's nests that have entangled the idea along the way," he writes. Why, then, is he silent about the fact that the blank slate was undermined by gentile scholars, while its most hysterical defenders were Jews? Prof. Pinker is a Jew—he writes of his shtetl grandparents, and of his relief in learning that a famous botched circumcision that led to a boy being reared as a girl was *not* a Jewish ritual—and could perhaps throw light on this interesting subject.

But the worst, of course, is his compulsion always to tell us what to think. Prof. Pinker is always jury-rigging justifications for liberalism and ignoring even the most obvious conservative conclusions. If men and women are different, it is stupid to act as if they are the same. If humans are tribal and territorial, "diversity" is a mistake. If humans differ in ability, equality is a chimera. If genes and peer group are what form the young, "early intervention" is useless. If there are born criminals, rehabilitation is a waste of time. If fecklessness is heritable, welfare swells the ranks of the feckless. If genes matter, some forms of eugenics are justified.

Whatever he thinks privately, Prof. Pinker would never suggest anything that might offend anyone at the *New York Review of Books*. Prof. Pinker tosses off the view that "intellectuals have a responsibility to take reasonable care that their ideas not be misused for evil ends." How are they supposed to do that? By misrepresenting their ideas? By concealing them? By shading the facts? By offering antidotes they don't believe in? It is hard to think of a way to protect ideas from misuse that does not involve deceit.

Although Prof. Pinker quotes him disapprovingly, one cannot help but wonder if he does not have a sneaking sympathy for Irving Kristol, who once wrote:

There are different kinds of truths for different kinds of people. There are truths appropriate for children; truths that are appropriate for students; truths that are appropriated for educated adults; and truths that are appropriate for highly educated adults, and the notion that there should be one set of truths available to everyone is a modern democratic fallacy. It doesn't work.

*Jared Taylor is the editor of **American Renaissance** and the author of **Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Race Relations in Contemporary America**.*
