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Oh no! Not social Darwinism again!

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In the introduction to his target article, Pérusse writes that "a behavioral adaptation [is] a complex set of actions retained by natural selection because of its positive effect on reproduction." This definition suggests that there are three independent events or actors that define adaptation, the retention of one trait rather than another, natural selection, which does the retaining, and positive effects on reproduction, which are natural selection's tools in effecting the retaining. But of course these are all one effect. Natural selection is not an actor that retains some traits; differential reproduction is not a tool of natural selection but the essence of it. If Pérusse's theory is a Darwinian one, there is only one effect here, namely, that the genes underlying some inherited behaviors have been and are being transmitted to subsequent generations in greater quantity than their alternatives. When the extra words are eliminated, the author's definition takes on a much plainer face: A behavioral adaptation is a complex set of actions that have been and are being selected. Or, to paraphrase George Williams (1966), an adaptation is by definition whatever natural selection produces and maintains.

Pérusse's theory is that "striving to elevate oneself in the social hierarchy is a behavioral adaptation" (sect. 1, para. 3). (I take the ambiguous section 4.2.2 to argue that male children are adapted to strive and that parents are adapted to assist and direct their striving.) Since adaptation refers here to whatever natural selection produces, all the discussion of adaptation as natural design is misleading and we can formulate Pérusse's theory using natural selection alone. (See Lipton & Thompson 1988; Thompson 1981, for a discussion of such degenerate versions of Darwinian theory.) When we distill the theory in this way it appears that men strive for social status primarily because in the history of the species, male striving begets male social success, women prefer to copulate with successful men, and therefore more frequent copulation has led to overrepresentation of striving men in the population.

I have several problems with this theory and with data that are offered to support it. First, even if genetic interest is the only factor determining male striving and striving promotes social success and women mate preferentially with successful males, female choice could still fail to be the primary cause of male striving. Under these conditions, a male's social success would have profound positive effects on his own well-being and that of his mate(s) and kin throughout the society, quite apart from its effects on the number of his potential conceptions. Moreover,

natural selection would not promote the female preference for successful males if male striving did not make males generally fit. So, unless Pérusse is prepared to make an argument for runaway sexual selection here, female choice cannot have the explanatory power he grants it.

Second, a high correlation between social success and the number of potential conceptions is not necessarily what we would expect if male striving has been produced and is maintained by millennia of selection for success. On the contrary, we would expect some sort of stabilizing selection to be acting so that the most extreme forms of social success-seeking would be selected *against*. Thus the data should exhibit a curvilinear relationship between social success and the number of potential copulations, not the linear relationship reported by Pérusse.

Moreover, other explanations suggest themselves for the linear relationship reported by Pérusse. One might be a relationship between levels of need-achievement and male sexual striving. Sexual conquest is just the kind of clear, attainable goal that people with high need-achievement seek out (McClelland 1985). Another might be a correlation between the number of a male's acquaintances and number of sexual opportunities. Given the criteria for success used in the research, "successful" males would necessarily seem to be people who know and are known by a lot of other people. Do we need to appeal to evolutionary theory to explain why widely acquainted people might have more sexual opportunities than narrowly acquainted ones?

Third, the research methodology and choice of subject population seems almost to have demanded subjects to bias their responses (sects. 2.1 and 2.2). Imagine that you are a white, male, French-speaking, third generation, citizen of Quebec. Imagine a bright undergraduate, in the fullness of youth, arriving at your door. The undergraduate reminds you of the population problem in French-speaking Quebec, and – at least implicitly – of how important it is that you and your fellow white male Quebecers of "strictly heterosexual orientation" get on with the business of spreading your white, French-speaking genes. The undergraduate then hands you a questionnaire that demands to know whether, in effect, you have been doing your patriotic duty. It would seem miraculous to me if the more ambitious members of the subject pool did not exaggerate their sexual "achievements."

Fourth, Pérusse's argument that present utility is a faithful indicator of evolutionary causation in human affairs is inconsistent. On the one hand, he wants to oppose those who would argue that language, technology, and the large scale of modern societies have broken the continuity of natural selection in humans since the Pleistocene; on the other, he wants to treat monogamy and birth control as anomalies of contemporary civilization! Can he have it both ways?

These sorts of conceptual and methodological errors seem endemic to research that is beguiled by social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is the use of evolutionary arguments to rationalize contemporary social practice. Face it. Social Darwinism is beguiling. What could be more beguiling to successful white males than the notion that their success is the result of an evolutionary "adaptation" that entitles them to offers of sexual intimacies from the females around them? Or the notion that they should cast aside the unnatural artifices of birth control and monogamy in order to better spread their striving genes throughout the species? But beguiling or not, there is nothing novel or essentially scientific about these ideas. They have the predictable self-serving quality of locker-room and board-room philosophy. When we make use of such notions we should know that we join the political and social debate that surrounds them not as scientists but as social ideologues.

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