

REVIEW

Howard L. Kaye
Franklin & Marshall College

In his new book, Richard M. Lerner is determined that the lessons learned from biology's shameful involvement in the horrors of Nazi genocidal programs must not be lost and that the hateful doctrine of biological determinism never again be permitted to justify oppression, inhumanity, and ultimately mass murder. Such vigilance is essential now, because he believes that the ideology of biological determinism has indeed been resurrected, this time in the guise of sociobiology, and that it too may well be used for "politically pernicious, fascist purposes" (p. 195).

To combat this evil, Lerner launches a two-pronged attack. First, by attempting to demonstrate the essential continuity, even identity—in both scientific concepts and policy implications—between the kind of biological determinism which led to the gas chambers and the sociobiology of today, Lerner seeks to discredit this biological perspective on moral and political grounds. To believe that there is something fixed in our nature, be it blood or genes, which makes us who we are and can become is, Lerner insists, a "pessimistic" (p. 9) and brutal ideology that has long been used to justify the exploitation, persecution, and even slaughter of others and the maintenance of the social status quo. Second, Lerner seeks to challenge biological determinism and, in particular, its contemporary incarnation as the "selfish gene" on scientific grounds. Sociobiologists, Lerner tells us, essentially ignore the role of the environment in human development and insist that "what we do, what we become, is built into us at conception, is biologically predetermined" (p. 13). But genes, Lerner reminds us, "do not exist in a vacuum" (p. 156), nor do they "represent fixed and immutable blueprints for behavior and social standing" (p. 180). They are instead "plastic entities that are fused with a complex context" (p. 180) constituted by the human organism's physiological, social, and cultural environments, thereby generating "an infinity of behavioral outcomes" from "the same hereditary contribution" (p. 157).

Address correspondence to Howard L. Kaye, Department of Sociology, Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, PA 17604, USA.

Lerner terms this more scientifically accurate perspective “developmental contextualism,” a perspective which he has derived from the work of T. C. Schneirla and Ethel Tobach. But not only is developmental contextualism more scientifically correct than biological determinism, and environmental determinism too, it is more politically and morally correct as well. If biological determinism has “necessarily xenophobic and ruthlessly selfish implications for society” (p. 103), the implications of developmental contextualism are unfailingly humane, liberating, and optimistic, celebrating human diversity and enhancing the human condition (pp. 169, 186): “the developmental contextual perspective demonstrates how human existence can be improved and in fact ‘recreated’ across the entire span of human life . . .” (p. 3). Combining “good science” with “good service” (p. 169), developmental contextualists will be able to plan programs and initiate interventions to transform “an entire cohort of people” in “positive” ways (pp. 82, 169, 189–190).

Written with considerable moral fervor, *Final Solutions* does succeed in demonstrating the scientific inadequacy of the ‘genes as blueprint’ metaphor and its personification as a ruthless Chicago mobster. Following the work of Robert Proctor and Robert Jay Lifton, Lerner reminds us, all too painfully, that good scientists may inadvertently or even intentionally contribute to bad causes. Nevertheless, I consider Lerner’s book to be a seriously inadequate and even self-defeating critique of “biological determinism.” As a critic of biological determinism and sociobiology, I have considerable sympathy for many of Lerner’s concerns, but I fear that the distorted and caricatured picture of “the enemy” which he presents is so glaring that his work will be too easily dismissed.

As a work of scholarship, this is a book that was written fifteen years too late. Recycling the work of others (primarily Proctor, Lifton, Chover, Lewontin, Gould, Kalikow, and Müller-Hill), Lerner does not realize that the straw men that he seeks to bludgeon—Social Darwinism, ethology, and sociobiology as proto- or crypto-fascist ideologies of biological determinism—have been dead for years. What representative sociobiologist would recognize himself or herself in Lerner’s portrait as someone who denies the interaction of genes and environment in human development and conduct (p. 103); who believes that women, blacks, and the poor are biologically inferior (pp. 125, 128–129); and who believes that the existing social order is biologically ordained, unchangeable, and essentially just (pp. 14, 19)?

Regrettably, Lerner’s analyses of individual theorists are no more reliable. Konrad Lorenz, despite his Nazi past, is not the advocate of killing and ruthless oppression that Lerner portrays him to be (compare Lerner’s patched-up quotation from pages 251 and 48 in *On Aggression* with the actual text). Nor does he believe that good and evil are genetically determined and advocate extermination of the ethically inferior (pp. 85, 87), which is how Lerner interprets Lorenz’s 1974 statement that “I

strongly hold that ethical inferiority of individuals due to heredity or to bad upbringing . . . is indeed a reality which has to be taken seriously." The truth about Konrad Lorenz is bad enough without such distortions.

Readers of Richard Dawkins, Melvin Konner, and E. O. Wilson will be similarly surprised to find them portrayed as celebrants of "blind, ruthless, militant aggression" (pp. 93-95). Those, however, who are unfamiliar with sociobiology would never know from Lerner's account that it is altruism not aggression which has been the central theoretical interest of sociobiology. And in a particularly egregious example of misreading, Wilson's lament about the possible loss of our humanity in the sense of a loss of altruism, cooperation, and creativity (1975, p. 575) becomes in Lerner's hands a warning against "the destruction of humanity" unless ruthless eugenics programs are enacted against the poor and the ignorant. No amount of moral fervor, no matter how understandable, can justify such misrepresentations.

It is indeed ironic that a scholar such as Lerner who criticizes the "faulty reasoning" and "inadequate scientific methods" of biological determinists for ignoring the importance of social and cultural contexts, for trivializing complex phenomena (p. 109), for "using findings from a few studies to make generalizations" about a whole class of phenomena, and for "making uncritical comparisons among studies" of very different things (p. 148) should be guilty of the same in his historical analyses and contemporary critiques. To lump together Plato, Spencer, Haeckel, Freud, Lorenz, Wilson, and Herrnstein, Social Darwinists, Eugenicists, Nazi racial hygienists, ethologists, and sociobiologists, with no appreciation of either the context or specific content of their work or the profound differences in their perspectives, is bad *social* science and constitutes "serious violations of the rules of scientific debate" (p. 148).

In his presentation of "developmental contextualism" as a more sophisticated scientific perspective, Lerner is certainly on surer ground. Yet his belief in its necessarily positive and humane implications, however comforting, requires careful consideration. Are well-intentioned programs "to develop positive and/or valued social behaviors" (p. 82) so benign; is the desire of experts to "enhance the human condition" through the manipulation of the masses such an unambiguous good? Does the "actualization" of some undefined "human potential" (pp. 170-186) automatically create a good human being and a good society? These questions are too important to be ignored. That they are ignored further confirms that *Final Solutions* is far more a work of polemics than one of scholarship and serious reflection.

REFERENCES

- Lorenz, K. (1983). *On aggression*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
 Wilson, E. O. (1975). *Sociobiology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.