

NAZIISM, BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM, SOCIOBIOLOGY, AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY: ARE THEY NECESSARILY SYNONYMOUS?

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Richard Lerner's new book, *Final Solutions: Biology, Prejudice, and Genocide*, is a powerful and troubling treatise. It weaves together several topical strands into a direct, clear, and compelling argument. The chief strength of the book lies in its focus on a single aspect of Nazi ideology (biological determinism), the role played in the maintenance of that ideology by medical and biological scientists, and Lerner's warnings about those he views as the contemporary successors of these scientists. Unlike Lerner's other contributions to the scholarly literature, this book is less a psychological treatise than it is a polemical history of some behavioral sciences in the twentieth century. Lerner's argument is provocative, clearly reasoned, and demands consideration by social scientists, humanists, and those who would avoid both the repetition of the past and our ignorance of its costs and lessons. The timeliness of the book is underscored by the current spectacle of genocidal mayhem in Bosnia, complete with the specter of officially endorsed rape in the service of ethnic hatred and racial pollution. To facilitate scholarly debate concerning Lerner's book, my emphasis in this review is on some troubling aspects of Lerner's argument, rather than on the many strengths of this important book.

Lerner's volume begins with the observation that the Nazi ideology advanced by Hitler had its philosophical roots in a cadre of biological scientists dating back into the previous century. These scientists gave voice to the notions of racial superiority and the importance of racial purity that lay at the heart of both Nazi ideology and the chilling actions (the Holocaust) enacted in its name. Like other recent authors, such as Robert J. Lifton, Lerner points out that Hitler was intellectually and pragmatically supported in the implementation of this genocidal policy by a variety of medical and biological scientists, who confirmed the im-

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portance of racial purity and the absolute moral correctness of eliminating "impure elements," such as Jews, gypsies, and other "Non-Aryan" races.

Lerner's primary focus is on Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian biologist whose contributions to the understanding of animal behavior earned him the Nobel Prize in 1973, even though, as Rajecki, Lamb, and Obmascher (1978) wrote shortly thereafter in an appraisal of his most widely cited scientific work: "[Lorenz's] provocative notions stimulated an enormous amount of research, the result of which is that all of Lorenz's postulates on imprinting can be viewed as incorrect" (p. 418). Lerner reviews several articles written by Lorenz during the Nazi era in support of his argument that Lorenz prostituted his science in the service of Nazi ideology and in particular played a prominent role in promulgating the notion that individual behavior, attainment, and potential are simply manifestations of biological destiny.

It is this notion of "biological determinism"—that we are what our genes make us—that comes in for the harshest criticism by Lerner. It is his contention that biological determinism did not die with the Nazis. Indeed, the fact that the first three behavioral scientists to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine (Lorenz, Tinbergen, Von Frisch) all studied the biological bases of behavior implicitly underscores for him the continuing belief on the part of many social scientists and philosophers that biological determinism is a viable and defensible position.

In fact, much of Lerner's book is focused on "the sociobiologists," whom Lerner sees as the contemporary successors of the German biological determinists who pandered to Hitler in the 1930s and 1940s. Lerner is at pains to argue that contemporary sociobiology contains the seeds of the sorts of prejudice that fueled Nazi philosophy. As a result, it could provide scientific justification for present and future evils that are qualitatively similar to those undertaken in the name of Naziism and racial purity earlier in the century.

Lerner's book is at its weakest in its designation of sociobiology as the epitome of contemporary scientific evil, however. Lerner takes several texts written by well-known sociobiologists to exemplify the dangers implicit in sociobiological theory (which he represents as a monolithic theoretical edifice). In his view, the cited writings of such authors as E. O. Wilson, Melvin Konner, and Philippe Rushton (respectively a biologist, an anthropologist, and a psychologist) exemplify the problems inherent in sociobiology. Such an inference from a few examples to an entire class of scientists is troubling to me. To argue that sociobiology is inherently evil because several "sociobiologists" have adopted positions that are troubling or incorrect seems a little like arguing that all painters should be eschewed because Hitler was a painter. Is nuclear physics benign and morally pure because Einstein was a pacifist, or wicked and immoral because Teller was a manipulative zealot? Neither, surely. In

fact, there are many scientists who might be called sociobiologists whose positions are nowhere near as deterministic as Wilson, Konner, and Rush-ton. Ironically, when Lerner presents developmental contextualism as his alternative to sociobiology, he cites work on sex reversal in coral reef fish—a phenomenon that exemplifies some of the most important socio-biological research of the last two decades (Charnov, 1982)! Unfortunately, Lerner fails to take advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate the diverse strains in the scholarly literature as it pertains to these troubling and difficult issues. Perhaps this was too much to ask of a book that was already overburdened. Sociobiology is in fact a broad approach to the study of behavior, not a single simple ideology. Sociobiologists attempt to understand how biological factors (most notably, inclusive fitness) influence behavior. They are especially concerned about evolutionary processes that have taken place over long periods of time and might have produced tendencies evident at the level of large groups or populations. Most sociobiologists have sought to explain how individual fitness depends on the constraints imposed and potentiation implied by others' behavior and by aspects of the physical environment. Few study or speculate about human behavior and many, if not most, well-respected sociobiologists emphasize the important role of environmental factors in shaping the potential manifestations of biological tendencies. Indeed, in George C. Williams' (1966) classic book on sociobiology (written long before E. O. Wilson coined the label "sociobiology") substantial emphasis is placed on the need to view biological tendencies in the context of environmental potentiation, support, and constraint. In my view, the most exciting and lasting recent contributions to our understanding of the evolution and genesis of behavior have been made by psychologists, ethologists, and behavioral ecologists adopting exactly this approach. In addition, many contemporary exponents of biological determinism are not sociobiologists. Few responsible behavioral biologists or social scientists adopt biological determinism as their model and it is misleading to argue that "sociobiology" is synonymous with "biological determinism."

Lerner provides many frightening examples of the ways in which scientists misuse their science and their status as scientists in pursuit of nonscientific ends. Doubtless, these abuses will continue, as will the efforts by nonscientists to misappropriate and misuse the words, analyses, and positions of scientists whose goals are nobler than or different from their own. Indeed, the ability to distinguish among bad science, the misuse of science, and the abuse of the scientific label by scientists pursuing nonscientific ends will remain an important and difficult issue for contemporary society. Much of Lerner's book is in fact concerned with scientists who have perverted the scientific method and misapplied the label "science" to efforts that are more political than scientific. This issue is one to which science has yet to develop a response. As Harlow,

Gluck, and Suomi (1972) wrote 20 years ago, "One cannot generalize but one must. If the competent do not wish to generalize, the incompetent will fill the field." Today, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, televised talk shows, and a growing phalanx of neoscientific journals are filled with the pronouncements of self-proclaimed experts. There are no easy ways for society, the media, or science, for that matter, to distinguish among these competing notions and individuals, sanctifying some as more "scientifically" defensible than others. In fact, one could argue that hucksterism is the sole determinant of popular impact and that science, as understood by scientists, is increasingly irrelevant to social discourse.

Lerner is at his best demonstrating the chilling implications of biological determinism and the awful role played by those scientists who provided the scholarly underpinning for unspeakable actions in the pursuit of biological purity. It is for this that his book demands serious attention, not only by scientists, but by many others as well. The lesson for the future is that science, philosophy, and ideology are not independent of one another. Together, each can be appropriated in the service of either good or evil. Biological determinism is just one notion that has been and surely will be misused. *Caveat civilis*.

One last, depressing thought deserves brief articulation as well. Social scientists tend to believe in causal relationships between ideologies or attitudes and behavior. There is no reason to believe that venal human behavior is less likely to occur in the absence of evil ideology, however. Over their recorded history, humans have manifested a seemingly infinite number of ways of wreaking havoc on one another, and the presence or absence of ideology does not appear to have altered these tendencies unduly. Even though racial hatred and other manifestations of intense prejudice are despicable, therefore, we cannot expect the elimination of such rationales for evil behavior to improve our common miserable fate.

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