Dangerous Thoughts . . .
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Dangerous Thoughts . . .

IN SEARCH OF HUMAN NATURE

The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought.
By Carl N. Degler.
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By Richard A. Shweder

ANYONE who has lived long enough in the social sciences has seen the nature-nurture pendulum swing: from nature in the first decades of the century, to nurture in the 1930's, 40's, 50's and 60's, to nature once again in the 70's, 80's and 90's.

"In Search of Human Nature" is a chronicle of the nature-nurture debate and a masterly intellectual history of the reverberation of Darwinian ideas in popular social thought and in the thoughts of social scientists. Carl N. Degler, an obvious admirer of contemporary socio-biological ideas and a distinguished historian at Stanford University, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for his book "Neither Black Nor White," argues that the Darwinian concepts of instinct, heredity and biological explanations of behavior are back — this time without the racism, without the sexism, without the eugenics and without recourse to the legend of the inherent inferiority of the uncivilized and the poor. I suspect Mr. Degler is half right — biology is back.

Just last year an article in Science magazine pointed out the many similarities between identical twins raised in different homes and declared: "For almost every behavioral trait so far investigated, from reaction time to religiosity, an important fraction of the variation

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among people turns out to be associated with genetic variation."

Equally revealing was "Three Cheers for Behavioral Genetics," an address delivered in 1986 by Sandra Scarr, the president of the Behavioral Genetics Association. Though she began by speaking out eloquently against one of the disquieting undercurrents of our times — against the idea that when it comes to innate intelligence something is wrong with black children — *she then went on to conclude* that "social-class differences in IQ are largely genetic." One of the basic messages of her address was that children of successful people may do better in life because they have better genes, and that those who believe anyone can be President do not think much of the office.

Another sign of the times appeared in the winter issue of the journal The Public Interest. There one finds an essay by Richard Herrnstein, a psychologist at Harvard University, in which he severely criticizes social scientists and policy makers for suppressing debate about the biological basis for racial differences and urges them to consider "the possibility that the different outcomes [in intellectual achievement, criminality and health for blacks and whites] are also the product of differing average endowments of people in the two races."

Mr. Degler's thesis is that such biological explanations of group differences were rampant in Western social thought from the time of Charles Darwin until the late 1920's, when they were excommunicated from polite and scholarly discourse. Mr. Degler says that although Darwin himself viewed racial differences as insignificant, his ideas about the biological roots of human behavior led to social Darwinism. He believes Darwin inadvertently set loose the supernumerary imp of genic group differences by positing that savage peoples did not have the bodies to support civilization.

Between 1880 and 1925, Mr. Degler shows, any scientist could, credibly and without censure, write in scientific publications about the maternal instinct of women and the hunting instinct of men. Any well-educated person could stereotype men as "unfettered by any such sentiment as sympathy, and therefore wholly devoid of moral conceptions of any kind." One could profess in public forums that when it came to the good things in life — intelligence, morality, character — blacks, yellows, Mediterranean or Eastern European whites had relatively bad genes. Sociological textbooks could declare that "the negro is not simply a black Anglo-Saxon deficient in school." Essays in The American Journal of Sociology could proclaim that there is "no reason why races may not differ as much in moral and intellectual traits as obviously as they do in bodily traits" and that it is a mistake "to subject them to the same methods of government."

REMEMBER Al Campanis, the Los Angeles Dodger executive who was fired in 1987 after a notorious interview on Nightline in which he said, during a celebration of the racial integration of baseball, "I truly believe that they [black major league baseball players] may not have some of the necessities to be, let's say, a field manager, or perhaps a general manager"?

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Such sentiments would scarcely have attracted attention 70 years ago.

But in the 1920's, biological explanations for group differences became taboo. These ideas were banished, Mr. Degler suggests, largely for ideological and political reasons. A coalition of Roosevelt liberals, newly arrived European immigrants and northward-bound migrating blacks favored equal opportunity for the disadvantaged, as did scholars who sympathized with downtrodden groups and who were willing to assume that differences between groups in intellectual achievement, behavior, talent and interest were mainly the result of social and educational discrimination.

Some of those liberal scholars, especially psychologists and sociologists at the University of Chicago — among them John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and William I. Thomas — had already questioned the idea that women are restricted by their very nature. Others, including John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner, assaulted the idea of human instinct, arguing that anyone could be taught to be or do anything. And anthropologists like Franz Boas, Robert Lowie and Alfred L. Kroeber were trying hard to establish that though all individuals may not be equally gifted, all racial groups are roughly equal in their endowment, and that differences in cultural inheritance and accomplishment have nothing to do with differences in the aggregate protoplasm of the tribe.

But Mr. Degler thinks these liberals threw the baby out with the bath water. By 1930, any mention of such Darwinian concepts as instinct, reproductive fitness, ancestry, breeding or the presumed continuity between human beings and beasts was just as unacceptable as making odious group comparisons. Even before the horrors of Nazism, biological explanations came to be seen, at best, as passé or eccentric and, at worst, as dangerously and politically incorrect. Drawing attention to group differences became un-American. Out of the fear that the idea of genetic inheritance would reinforce disparaging stereotypes harmful to individual rights, an equal-protection clause was placed around scientific research.

But it would appear that despite the war experience with theories of racial superiority, the continued interest of biologists and some psychologists in the genetic determination of intelligence and other traits was irrepressible. Mr. Degler says that Darwinian ideas returned from exile immediately after World War II, in September 1946, during a famous conference on genetics and social behavior sponsored by the Jackson Laboratory at Bar Harbor, Me. According to Mr. Degler, it was there that biologists began a successful counterattack on the "behaviorists and enemies of the concept of instinct." And today one can see the effects of that attack. In the work of the ethologist Konrad Lorenz, the zoologist William D. Hamilton, the sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson and many other evolutionists, it is clear, Mr. Degler argues, that neo-Darwinian concepts have been restored to their rightful place in the social sciences. But this time, he suggests, biologists have their eyes fixed on our common human nature — on the evolution of morality, sexual dimorphism and the incest taboo — and not on the differences between ethnic and racial groups.

Although Mr. Degler tenders some provocative theses, he spends most of his time taking us on a splendid, informed, eye-opening textual tour of the acceptance, rejection and acceptance again of biosocial thought from the late 19th century to the present. His excursion includes a look at an unopened copy of Gregor Mendel's work on genetics that was found in Darwin's personal library; obscure turn-of-the-century feminist doctoral theses at the University of Chicago; the 1921 Lowell Lectures at Harvard University, given by the instinct theorist William McDougall; the letters and essays of Franz Boas, advocating intermarriage as an antidote to prejudice; and recent texts on the genetics of altruism and on the debates about sociobiology.

ON Mr. Degler's tour one learns many remarkable things about some of the people who have shaped 20th-century thought: Alfred Russel Wallace, one of the founders of the theory of evolution, came to believe that the human brain was too special to have been shaped by evolution and was thus led to infer a higher intelligence and to embrace spiritualism; Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, who is often thought of as a cultural relativist, believed "that behind all cultures really stood a common system of values, especially apparent in the culture of Europeans"; and Margaret Mead, who is sometimes castigated as an extreme cultural determinist, took a great interest in the biological foundations of gender differences and believed that women are inherently less suitable to military combat.

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One also discovers that as late as the 1970's it required courage to argue, as did the sociologist Alice Rossi, that "differences between men and women are not simply a function of socialization, capitalist production, or patriarchy," and one learns that sociobiologists claim to have disproved a basic assumption of psychoanalysis — the principle of incestuous desire — and that most psychoanalysts seem unaware of that claim.

One of the most surprising points Mr. Degler makes is that the eugenicists of the early 20th century, who advocated the forced sterilization of imbeciles and criminals, were a liberal lot. After the defeat of Lamarck's exquisitely ethical notion that the characteristics one acquires through personal effort and use are passed on, biologically, to future generations, there seemed to be no biological incentive to work hard. In the new Mendelian scientific world, one's effort had no effect on one's genes. There was no just desert. Kids could not count on plasmic benefits from their parents' toil.

But Darwin's cousin Sir Francis Galton, the originator of the eugenics movement, found a silver lining in the Mendelian cloud. He began to promote the hopeful idea that by applying the principles of plant and animal breeding to human beings, the world would be a better place. In effect, everyone in subsequent generations could be in the top 10 percent. With some long-term planning and restrictions on the unregulated market in genes, the species could be free of disease, criminality and stupidity. Thus, the year Galton died, 1911, the world was filled with optimistic, reform-minded eugenicists: Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard University, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Winston Churchill. Interestingly, Mr. Degler reminds us, it was the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern states, not the up-to-date, scientifically minded Northern establishment, that most strenuously resisted the sterilization laws.

Mr. Degler argues that the eugenicists, who advocated forced sterilization of imbeciles, were a liberal lot.

"In Search of Human Nature" is not without shortcomings. The main imperfection is that Mr. Degler's intellectual tour is far stronger than his defense of his thesis. Without intending to heap aspersions on such a fine work, I am skeptical on several counts.

The thesis that biology is back, but not as an explanation for group differences, can only be sustained, it seems to me, by relegating to footnotes most of the literature in behavioral genetics. Perhaps Mr. Degler is just playing safe with taboo topics as he gets closer to contemporary anxieties. But whatever the reason, his gripping tale wanes after the 1946 Bar Harbor meeting. The unavoidable and marvelous fact of human diversity and cultural variety gets lost in a wave of enthusiasm for the accomplishments of the new biologists, who, on the topic of group differences, as represented by Mr. Degler, seem evasive, with very little new to say.

For instance, the contemporary sociobiological position Mr. Degler ascribes to E. O. Wilson — that differences between species are primarily genetic but differences between human groups primarily learned — could easily have been written by Franz Boas or Alfred Kroeber or Ruth Benedict or almost any other cultural determinist or learning theorist of the 1930's or 40's. It ducks the possible implications of sociobiology.

The real news in 1991 is that with social biology back, the study of the biology of race, culture and social class is not far behind. It is led by scholars who believe that whether the subject is lactose intolerance, mathematical reasoning or shyness, the possibility of genetically determined group differences is still a proper topic for scientific inquiry, just as it was in the 1890's. Mr. Degler skirts rather than engages this significant, even if hazardous, intellectual riptide.

Moreover, Mr. Degler does not try to develop a credible theory of the role of dogma in science. He argues, for instance, that biological explanations for social behavior went out of fashion during the Roosevelt years for ideological and political reasons. While this is not implausible, it is offered almost as a throwaway line. Mr. Degler makes little attempt to analyze what those political objectives might have been. Were opponents of biological explanations trying to insure equitable treatment for all individuals regardless of group membership, or were they trying to form new economic interest groups (for example, labor unions) unfractured by hateful ethnic, racial and gender comparisons, or did they have other reasons?

The analysis of dogma is even scantier when Mr. Degler gets to the doctrines of the contemporary biosocial scene. He is so clearly impressed by them that his thesis assumes an almost daunting asymmetrical shape. He implies that whatever influence ideology may have had over science, it ended in September 1946, when real science, Darwinian science, began once again.

Mr. Degler's thesis is so casually defended, and held so close to his chest, that it can almost be set aside as incidental to his rich and stimulating exegesis of numerous and diverse social science texts, old and new. Nevertheless his historical account is relevant to contemporary debates about race, gender and ethnicity.

INDEED, after following Mr. Degler through a single arc of the nature-nurture pendulum it seems apparent that the last thing we need in our society today is a cataclysmic confrontation between born-again social Darwinists, eager to convict other groups of genetic inferiority in the name of hard science and free speech, and born-again social determinists, eager to make the world homogeneous in the name of social justice and equal rights. Pluralism, the appreciation of differences, is the first victim of such confrontations, for it is rejected by both camps. Hierarchy, a concomitant of excellence, is the second victim, for it is disparaged as the herald of oppression. And justice is the third victim, for uniform treatment is often unjust, as Anatole France knew so well when he made his ironic remark about the majestic equality of French law, which forbade rich and poor alike from sleeping under the bridges of Paris.

Can we weave together difference, fairness, excellence, community and decency into our moral and legal fabric? Can our presumptively pluralistic society learn to be truly comfortable with diversity? That remains to be seen. As our liberal democracy stands nervously poised at the start of another round of debates about pluralism, multiculturalism and group differences, it is incumbent upon us to understand why such debates are so difficult, painful, threatening, sometimes morally obnoxious — and why, and on what terms, we must have them nonetheless. "In Search of Human Nature" is an indispensable, and safe enough, primer for the debate. □

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