

9.20 M.I.T. 2005

Class 28

Critique of Cultural determinism

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:

A false dichotomy

1. What is the error of the false dichotomy that has often been used by persons arguing against the relevance of biology to an understanding of human behavior?

(Such arguments have been common in writings of sociologists, cultural anthropologists, some feminists, and also some educators.)

Either culture or biology.

But almost always both are determinants of behavior.

Such writings often set a proximate hypothesis against an evolutionary one. But one cannot substitute for the other.

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:

Margaret Mead's claims: Popular but wrong

2. Summarize Derek Freeman's critique of the writing of Margaret Mead, the cultural anthropologist whose ideas presented in her 1928 book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, became so popular in the 20th century.

p 132-133

She was in Samoa only a few months
Freeman worked there for years.

What did she claim?

How did she come to believe these claims?

Why did she make such errors?

Who was Frank Boas, her teacher, and what did he believe?

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:

Contrasting views of human nature

3. Contrast the “blank slate” view of human nature with sociobiological views.

p 134 - 136

We have already discussed this.

Note two new things here:

1) Gould's claim about “biological potentiality”
vs “biological determinism”

2) Lack of rigorous tests of cultural determinism
predictions

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:

Females attracting males

4. Attributes that determine men's attraction to young women (on the average) have shown considerable consistency, even across cultures. ("Beauty" is not a myth or a politically determined creation, as claimed by Naomi Wolf.)

What is the major, general signal value of these attributes, fitting the expectations of sociobiologists?

p 137-139

They indicate health, fertility, sexual maturity and youth. \equiv "lifetime reproductive potential"

see table and graph. Note range and exceptions.

Also keep in mind that sociobiological hypotheses are not about "always" and are not disproved by "sometimes".

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:
Cultural differences in male preferences?

5. Give a sociobiological interpretation of the finding that Yomybato men tend to prefer females with a figure that is heavier and with a larger waist-to-hip ratio than preferred by most men in more advanced cultures.

p 141-142 see Alcock's somewhat fuzzy suggestion.

Alcock's suggestion should apply to other groups that are/were isolated from modern societies. We need more information re advantages of extra body weight for withstanding diseases, etc.

(Also note: one exception does not disprove the more general finding.)

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John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:
Staying with a group: an innate preference

6. Humans everywhere have a strong tendency to stay and act within groups, and these groups may compete with each other, sometimes violently.

Try to specify a list of evolutionary fitness benefits of “groupism” feelings.

- Probability of finding mate
- “ “ rescue / survival
- “ “ better defense against predators or hostile groups.
- Advantages in food acquisition: gathering, hunting, with sharing and specialization.
- Help in child rearing / education.
- Advantages in learning from older, more experienced group members

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:

A sociologist's misunderstandings

7. From Appendix, ch 7, Q3:

Quote from a sociology textbook: “In our view, the theory that there is actually a biological basis for reciprocity [among humans] remains unproven; general self-interest and an ability to see beyond the short term may be all that is required to generate such ... behavior” (Wallace and Wolf, 1999: *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, 5th edition, p 391)

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:
Languages as evidence of cultural determinism?

8. Appendix, ch 7, Q2:

Languages vary greatly among human societies. If someone claims that this fact clearly demonstrates the greater importance of culture than biology in the control of human behavior, what would a sociobiologist say in response?

John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, ch 7:
Evolutionary psychology: Does our biology make us do it?

(Hopefully you can deal with statements of the sort quoted in Q1 by now.)

Stephan Jay Gould has written a critique of evolutionary psychology in which he claims, “Men are not programmed by genes to maximize matings, nor are women devoted to monogamy by unalterable nature. We can speak only of capacities, not requirements or even determining propensities. Therefore, our biology does not make us do it” (1996).

Analyze this criticism of sociobiology in the context of the culture versus biology dichotomy.