

18 October 2009

Notes on

Susan McKinnon, *Neo-liberal genetics: the myths and metaphors of evolutionary psychology*  
(Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2005)

1) Introduction:

- a) EP offers a single theory of underlying maximization of genetic “utility” (hence a naturalization of neo-liberal values) to explain family, gender difference, social relations, at the exact moment when they are now in flux.
- b) 5 basic arguments against EP
  - i) Theory of mind / culture cannot account for human social organization / behavior
    - (1) Evolutionary origins and history
    - (2) Contemporary variation
  - ii) Assumptions about genetics and gender not supported by anthropological evidence
  - iii) Not only their premises (as above) but also their evidence is flawed
  - iv) Their fictional theory is based on false generalization from their own culture
  - v) This naturalization of one culture
    - (1) Marginalizes other cultural values
    - (2) Suppresses view of human potential
- c) Contrasting theories of mind
  - i) EP posits massively modular mind running Darwinian algorithms in specific domains
    - (1) So maximizing of utility (gene “market share” in succeeding generations) becomes the ultimate reason for human behavior
    - (2) And proximate reasons (cultural ideas, beliefs, values) are reducible to that logic
  - ii) CA (cultural anthropology) posits general learning / problem-solving capacity
    - (1) This is what we evolved to develop
    - (2) In this case, culture is
      - (a) not reducible to genetic utility-maximization
      - (b) but is “conceptual framework” within which people live and act
      - (c) [JP: I want to nuance this: I think culture is composed of corporeal / affective subjectification practices that work with evolved capacity for neural plasticity to produce “bodies politic.” So for me, “conceptual framework” is too mentalistic. Yes, culture does produce a “world view” but it also works with inherited basic emotions, producing triggers and thresholds for them as well as producing cognitive-affective structures underlying moral intuitions.]
- d) The calculus of genetics and gender
  - i) For EP, kinship relations follow from genetic calculations
    - (1) Individual calculation of genetic proximity
    - (2) Utility of specific behaviors for maximizing genetic utility
  - ii) Different and unchanging gender strategies for “investment” in gene futures market

- (1) Females look for males with resources
  - (2) Males look for female fertility
- e) The science and politics of naturalization
  - i) Naturalizing social categories and hierarchies
  - ii) De-naturalizing them
    - (1) Race as social construct
    - (2) Language as symbolic and not just informational / utilitarian
    - (3) Kinship / sex / gender categories are symbolic rather than genetic
- f) The cold hard facts of science
  - i) EP casts itself as “realistic” and its opponents as “romantics”
  - ii) McKinnon will claim EP is just bad science
    - (1) It ignores contrary evidence
    - (2) It just naturalizes a “neo-Victorian” sexual morality and neo-liberal economics
- 2) Mind and culture
  - a) Natural selection as puppeteer, policy maker and programmer
    - i) Two EP moves
      - (1) Natural selection = “god” = creator and source of order, design, truth, purpose
      - (2) Genes become animated: they compete, control, etc
    - ii) Consequences
      - (1) EP has emptied human mind of cness, agency, creativity
      - (2) And transferred them to genes and NS
  - b) Natural selection’s “shameless ploy”
    - i) Humans are victims of false consciousness: we miss the underlying genetic logic
    - ii) So NS is ultimately devious:
      - (1) It has created us w/ complex moral cness, reasoning, emotions, freedom
      - (2) In order to conceal the underlying genetic logic reality
      - (3) [JP: again I would want to nuance this: we shouldn’t throw out unconscious moral intuition production. But that intuition production is not governed by individualistic genetic utility maximization logic; you have to be able to think group selection. And that group selection can be oriented to production of different subject positions, as long as that’s fairly stable structure.]
  - c) Mind as mechanism and module
    - i) Mental modules running Darwinian algorithms in specific domains
    - ii) Fixed computer architecture metaphor doesn’t mesh with neurodynamics
  - d) Fixed architecture vs neural plasticity
    - i) Genetic pleiotropy: hurts EP’s 1 to 1 gene – trait assumption
    - ii) Integrative / differential neurodynamics
    - iii) Epigenesis and neuroplasticity
    - iv) “mental construction”: recursive embedding for complex conceptualization
  - e) Shady accounting genes
    - i) Although EP denies it assumes 1 to 1 gene-trait correlation, its Its rhetoric is filled with reified genes and modules
    - ii) Problems:
      - (1) No such genes or modules have been demonstrated for specific behaviors
      - (2) But EP goes on positing them and then calculating them “as if”
      - (3) Human genome is not big enough to support genes for specific modules

- (4) Hereditary genes (DNA strings) are not functional genes (mature tRNA strings)
- f) The rationality of absolutely everything
  - i) You can make any behavior functional / adaptive with a plausible evolutionary story
  - ii) Critical analysis of Buss's jealousy study
- g) The choice that is not a choice
  - i) EP uses an RCT framework, but its agents are not humans but microscopic entities
  - ii) For example, competing sperm and choosing eggs
  - iii) [JP: again, I agree that you can't invest genes, sperm, eggs, etc. with agency. But you shouldn't underplay psychology findings as to automatic / unconscious mechanisms. You just don't need to say those mechanisms are reducible to genetic logic.]
- h) The individual that is not an individual
  - i) EP can't explain individual variation in response to allegedly universal modules
    - (1) Why individual vary in expression of cultural norms
    - (2) Why there are so many possible responses to same act
    - (3) Why some responses are inappropriate
  - ii) Bcs EP won't accept non-genetic utility maximizing cultural logics and ind. histories
- i) The culture that is not culture
  - i) For EP, cultural variation is just surface manifestation of deep structure of gene logic
  - ii) Buss resorts to ad hoc stories to account for discrepancies here
- 3) Individual and society: you'll never get back to concrete social life from the assumption of abstract individualism. In particular, you'll never explain altruism on the basis of neo-liberal genetic individualism.
  - a) Genetic individualism and the problem of the "social"
    - i) Primary order of social relations to be explained by kin selection and inclusive fitness
      - (1) Social relations follow genetic relations
      - (2) And social behaviors also follow suit, keyed to degree of genetic relation
    - ii) Secondary order of social relations explained by reciprocal altruism
      - (1) Sahlins critique: reciprocal altruism doesn't produce differential fitness
    - iii) SM sees a "double genetic determinism" / "erasure of culture"
      - (1) Specific forms of social relations develop in response to gene max logic
      - (2) These forms of social relations are coded in the human genome
  - b) The poverty of the genetic calculus
    - i) Social relations are irreducible to gene max logic
      - (1) Unilineal descent and exogamy = disjunct btw residence and genetic relation
      - (2) But it's residence units that are effective social units of solidarity, cooperation, etc
    - ii) Kinship is social, not just genetic: it's as much about "doing" as about "being"
      - (1) Feeding is what makes kin out of strangers
      - (2) Adoption creates parent / child relations, despite rhetoric of "real" bio-parents
      - (3) Gay and lesbian communities / families
    - iii) EP reduces symbolic / mediated kin culture to natural / immediate gene max logic
  - c) The poverty of individual self-interest
    - i) For EP, kin and social relations should "rationally" be restrictive to protect and maximize investments for later payoff in gene futures market
    - ii) But we see lots of examples of expansive social kin systems
    - iii) EP has naturalized a capitalist / individualist system
      - (1) Econ and kin systems are related, but capitalism is not the only economic system

- (2) Radical self-interest is actually seen as witchcraft in many societies
  - d) The futures in cloning
    - i) [JP: I really love this section. It's hilarious in many ways.]
    - ii) SM picks the Posner piece for 4 reasons
      - (1) Figures pure dissolution of society into individual genetic / econ competitors
      - (2) Example of interchange of economic and biological metaphors
      - (3) Shows how influential EP has become
      - (4) Shows how a vision of (evolutionary) past shapes vision of (social) future
    - iii) SM's analysis of the Posners
      - (1) We would expect evolved preference for sperm donation and cloning
      - (2) Assumes kinship follows individualist genetic calculus and "narcissism"
      - (3) Three options for max gene utility via gene / wealth interaction
        - (a) Hoarding good genes / wealth (via cloning)
        - (b) Trading wealth for better genes in mate (marriage)
        - (c) Trading good genes for wealth in mate (marriage)
      - (4) If you find utility in marriage, you'll have to share genes as "price"
      - (5) Thus any supposed "altruism" is just market calculation
    - iv) Posners are only latest example of econ / biology interchange
      - (1) Marx letter about Darwin and English society
      - (2) Sahlins and the cycle of naturalization
        - (a) Apply capitalism logic to nature
        - (b) Interpret society in light of this "nature"
      - (3) Posners show
        - (a) Complete overlap of
          - (i) Maximized econ utility and maximized genetic utility
          - (ii) Invisible hands of market and NS
        - (b) Complete dissolution of society into rational individuals
- 4) Sex and gender
  - a) Plan of the chapter: examine claims about evolved psych mechanisms
    - i) Different gendered investment / reproductive strategies
      - (1) Males
        - (a) Brief investment
        - (b) Strategy: access as many fertile females as possible while ensuring paternity
      - (2) Females
        - (a) Long-term investment
        - (b) Strategy: gain access to males with resources
    - ii) SM will examine three "presumed universals"
      - (1) Men control resources
      - (2) Sexual "double standard"
      - (3) Male control of females
  - b) Tracking the resources
    - i) Rather than just "males control resources" we see gendered division of labor
      - (1) Industrial capitalism did divide male productive wage labor from female domestic reproductive
      - (2) But most societies divide "productive" work among genders
    - ii) EP seems caught with a "man the hunter" myth

- (1) It's not that men just look for pretty women (supposedly marker of fertility); they look for women who are industrious, productive, and with access to resources (qualities which are seen as male by EP)
- (2) Indeed, female gathering was more important than male hunting
- (3) So really men needed to find women with resources so they could indulge in unreliably productive hunting; they couldn't just look for pretty women
- c) The oxymoronic "male sexual mind"
  - i) EP assumes that males have hard-wired "Madonna-whore" switch
    - (1) Spread genes with loose women (but don't give them resources)
    - (2) Find faithful women who guarantee paternity (give resources in exchange)
  - ii) But while this may feel natural and universal, it's really not (p. 85)
  - iii) [JP: point of contact with body politic generation of moral intuitions]
- d) The cultural values of promiscuity
  - i) Number of male / female sexual partners varies with different cultures
  - ii) EP fails to see that sexuality is organized by larger cultural system which sometimes works against "natural" male promiscuity (p. 91; 93)
    - (1) Etoro: *hame* as life force concentrated in semen
    - (2) United States: "spermatic economy"
    - (3) Thailand: monks and spiritual transcendence
    - (4) Kaulong: female pollution
- e) Unwiring the "Madonna-whore" switch
  - i) Not true that all societies disdain female promiscuity and think it hurts marriage
  - ii) Examples: hunter-gatherer societies with expected / required pre- or extra-marital sex
  - iii) Cases of polyandry are particularly troublesome for EP
- f) Like a lion and its kill: proprietariness and its discontents
  - i) Not all societies produce men worried about female fidelity and assured paternity
  - ii) Examples: hunter-gatherer societies where extra-marital sex is no big deal
  - iii) Again, polyandry is real trouble for EP:
    - (1) It's not that men have control over women's access to other men
    - (2) It's that women have rights of access to many men
  - iv) But you don't need polyandry to see inclusive rather than exclusive sex systems where male certainty of paternity is not guaranteed
  - v) Bridewealth must be seen in larger system of gift and debt; EP misses this bcs of their neo-liberal presuppositions of individual interest, gene max logic, etc.
- g) From "core mindset" to cultural meaning
  - i) Three findings from all these ethnographic counter-examples
    - (1) About EP's theory of mind and culture
    - (2) About the ethnocentrism and naturalization of EP
    - (3) About the nature of meaning in human cultures
  - ii) Mind and culture: to account for the discrepancies btw their predictions and results
    - (1) EP would need a host of "switching mechanisms" to turn on or off male promiscuity, etc.
    - (2) Why not just accept cultural creativity?
    - (3) [JP: again, I want to nuance SM: it's not just "meaningful cultural orders" (115): "meaning" is too mentalistic for me. It's that cultures are composed of corporeal

affective subjectification practices producing distribution of traits in population of bodies politic.]

- iii) Ethnocentrism / naturalization
  - iv) Culture and meaning
    - (1) Same cause can have different effects
    - (2) Same “effect” can have different causes
      - (a) Female “promiscuity” isn’t that in some cultures; the meaning of females w/ multiple partners doesn’t occur in an “chaste vs promiscuous” duality
      - (b) *Natural History of Rape*
        - (i) Tries to see rape as genetic strategy (way for weak males to compete)
        - (ii) But can this handle rape diversity?
          1. Organized war rape as terrorism / cultural warfare
          2. Slave rape as economic strategy / display of power
          3. Gang rape as male-bonding (rather than competition)
- 5) Science and fiction
- a) Good science requires we submit our deep categories to contrary evidence; EP fails at this; instead they construct “evidence” that fits their deep categories
  - b) Organic and cross-species analogies
    - i) Analogies of social and organic processes
      - (1) Highly socialized mate preference is analogized to basic emotions as automatic and unconscious;
      - (2) e.g., gagging on repulsive food; but there’s a wide variety of food preferences that are learned [JP: yes, this is the point about bodies politic]
    - ii) Cross-species analogies
      - (1) This anthropomorphizes animal “preferences”
      - (2) And naturalizes humans:
        - (a) We have the same “preferences”
        - (b) We “mate” instead of marry
      - (3) Technically speaking, EP confuses
        - (a) analogy (same function, but could be from differing evolutionary causes)
        - (b) and homology (descent from common ancestor)
      - (4) These analogies come from selective comparisons (e.g.: chimps vs bonobos)
      - (5) The analogies are possible bcs EP has naturalized human cultural creativity as expression of ultra-Darwinist individual max gene logic that supposedly holds for other animals as well
  - c) The fabrication of cross-cultural deep structures
    - i) EP sees cultural diversity as epiphenomenal to universal deep structure
    - ii) Evidence for supposed universal deep structure
      - (1) Preference studies
        - (a) American college students (psych class extra credit)
        - (b) Contemporary hunter-gatherers
          - (i) Selective reading of biologizing ethnographers (e.g., Chagnon)
          - (ii) Ignoring fact of complex contemporary relations of hunter-gatherers
            1. Contemporary world economy
            2. History of colonialization
            3. Restricted ecological space

- (c) Selective reading / misreading of ethnography of non-HG societies
    - (i) Not just misreading details
    - (ii) But ignoring the concrete social setting of those details
  - (d) Buss's survey of 37 societies
    - (i) Heavily weighted to European / urbanized, cash economy
    - (ii) Imports a priori categories and doesn't ask for respondents own categories
    - (iii) Fails to support predicted gender-differentiated preference mechanisms
- (2) Overall logic
  - (a) Dismiss cultural variation as epiphenomenal
  - (b) Explain it by reference to "cultural factors" that have no explained relation to deep structure: how are they able to kick in at some points but not others?
- d) Evolutionary and genetic history: the cartoon version
  - i) EP needs to show how evolved psych mechanisms
    - (1) Were adapted in Pleistocene environment
    - (2) How they were transmitted genetically
  - ii) EP doesn't really have much evidence for what the Pleistocene was like; you can't read social relations from the fossil record the way you can read physiology / diet
  - iii) Besides, it wasn't really "like" any one thing at all: it was changing, and so humans adapted for general problem-solving flexibility, not fixed domain-specific modules
  - iv) Furthermore, we're expected to believe that no intervening evolution has occurred
  - v) In fact, culture preceded emergence of Homo sapiens (we are bio-cultural)
  - vi) Scathing concluding remark on the fictionality of EP (142)
- 6) Science and morality
  - a) It wouldn't be so bad if EP were just a theory; but it is "covertly prescriptive" (145)
  - b) It closes down research into social / psychological history and thus shapes our vision of possible futures
  - c) So often there's a covert or even overt message to bring contemporary society more in line with our inherited psych mechanisms
  - d) Or if not, there's some appeal to a mysterious (for EP) cultural agency that allows us to design culture that will ameliorate these deep structures
  - e) EP analyses of contemporary politics are often "monstrous" (149) in that they license massive ignorance of historical detail in favor of easy deductions from supposed presence of inherited psych modules