Human Nature and the Evolution of Society

STEPHEN K. SANDERSON
CONTENTS

Preface ix
Notes on Dating xiii

1 Theoretical Foundations 1
Darwinian Social Science Redux, 1
Darwinian Foundations, 3
Sociobiology and Evolutionary Psychology, 5
Qualifiers, 8
The Contents of Human Nature, 11
Conclusion, 12
Summary, 13
Questions for Discussion, 16
References and Notes, 16

2 Beginnings 19
African Genesis, African Exodus, 20
Big Brains, 24
The Language Instinct, 27
The Cultural Big Bang, 32
Conclusion, 34
Summary, 35
Questions for Discussion, 37
References and Notes, 38

3 Getting a Living 41
To Hunt and to Gather, 41
Ancient Affluence?, 46
First Agriculture, 49
Tillers of the Soil, 53
Herders of Beasts, 59
Merchants and Traders, 60
## Contents

- Capitalists Small and Large, 63
- Capitalists by Nature?, 68
- Conclusion, 69
- Summary, 70
- Questions for Discussion, 73
- References and Notes, 74

### 4 Foodways
- What's for Dinner?, 77
- Sweets and Meats, 81
- Strategic Foraging, 83
- Sacred Cows and Abominable Pigs, 87
- The Milky Way, 92
- Summary, 100
- Questions for Discussion, 103
- References and Notes, 104

### 5 Finding Mates
- Incest Avoidance and the Incest Taboo, 108
- Sexual Selection, 115
- Strategic Sex, 119
- Mate Choice, 126
- Dominant Males Litter the Landscape, 141
- The Straight and the Gay, 144
- Summary, 152
- Questions for Discussion, 154
- References and Notes, 155

### 6 Family and Marriage
- Kith and Kin, 162
- Father's Kin or Mother's?, 164
- One Wife or Many?, 170
- One Husband or Many?, 175
- Summary, 181
- Questions for Discussion, 183
- References and Notes, 184

### 7 Parenthood
- Maternal Instincts, 188
- A Child's-Eye View, 192
- Many Children or Few?, 195
Contents

Sons or Daughters?, 200
Infanticidal Deeds, 205
Summary, 209
Questions for Discussion, 212
References and Notes, 213

8 Gender

Gender Everywhere, 216
Learning About Gender, 224
Gender Economies, 225
Men, Women, and Work, 229
Conclusion, 238
Summary, 239
Questions for Discussion, 241
References and Notes, 242

9 Status and Wealth

Status Striving, 245
Status Striving Unleashed, 248
Status and Wealth in Modern Times, 254
Status Striving Run Amok, 256
Conclusion, 259
Summary, 260
Questions for Discussion, 261
References and Notes, 262

10 Power and Politics

Struggling for Power, 266
Societies Without Bosses, 269
Chiefs on the Horizon, 271
Kings, Emperors, and Oriental Despots, 274
Conclusion, 281
Summary, 282
Questions for Discussion, 284
References and Notes, 285

11 Violence

Murder, He Wrote, 287
Getting in Touch with Our Inner Chimp, 296
Killing Enemies: The Small Scale, 298
Killing Enemies: The Large Scale, 305
Contents

Summary, 310
Questions for Discussion, 312
References and Notes, 313

12 Race and Ethnicity 317
The Origins of Races, 317
Racism Then and Now, 324
Ethnic Primordialism, 330
Summary, 334
Questions for Discussion, 336
References and Notes, 337

13 Religion 339
Spirits, Gods, and Ritual Specialists, 339
Shamans and Healers, 341
Many Gods or One?, 343
Why Are People Religious?, 344
Religion in Its Socioecological Context, 347
The New Atheism, 349
Summary, 350
Questions for Discussion, 352
References and Notes, 353

14 Arts 355
What Are the Arts?, 355
Visual Art, 358
Literature, 364
Music, 369
Conclusion, 374
Summary, 375
Questions for Discussion, 377
References and Notes, 378

Epilogue: Evolution and Existence 381

Bibliography 387
Technical Terms 429
Index 435
For much of the twentieth century, especially after the 1930s, social science was dominated by explanations of human behavior that gave primary (and sometimes overwhelming) emphasis to the causal role of the social and cultural environment. Social scientists embraced the view of the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, who claimed that the human mind was a tabula rasa, or "blank slate," on which society wrote its "script." Human behavior was therefore principally determined by the social and cultural circumstances in which people live. This is the prevailing view still today. Indeed, the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker calls it "the official view."

But in the 1970s and 1980s an intellectual revolution began. Some social scientists, mostly anthropologists and psychologists (and a handful of sociologists), returned to the general theory of life adumbrated by Charles Darwin more than a century before. Darwin is, of course, best known for his theory of evolution by natural selection, and he focused mostly on animals. But he also thought that humans evolved from earlier animals—primates, principally the great apes—and he thought that the human mind was much more than a blank slate. It contained numerous features that were evolutionary products and continued to shape behavior. His most important book on humans was *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in which he argued that human emotions and their expression, principally in the human face, were universals that were innate.

The new maverick social scientists thought that Darwinian thinking held one of the keys to explaining many features of human behavior and social life. The new approaches were called, first, sociobiology, and then later evolutionary psychology. In time a major intellectual organization was formed, the Human Behavior and Evolution Society, or HBES. The evolutionary analysis of behavior was becoming a significant force. New specialized journals were founded and textbooks started to be written, sure signs that Darwinian social science was becoming institutionalized.

This book is a new contribution to the list. There are several excellent textbooks, but most of them concentrate heavily on theoretical principles and are highly technical. There is nothing wrong with this—in fact, such books are much needed—but
it is not the only way to do it. This book, intended both for students and the general reader, is different in several important ways. First, it is less technical and lighter on theory. The first chapter outlines the most basic principles of Darwinian social science, but only to the extent that they are necessary to understand what follows. Second, an effort has been made to choose topics that are highly appealing to students and general readers and to present them in lively, engaging, and highly accessible prose. Finally, it expands the coverage by adding topics that are either underemphasized in existing texts or ignored altogether. I refer in particular to the subjects of language origins, subsistence strategies, human foodways and dietary practices, gender roles and relations, race and ethnicity, religion, and the arts. The book concludes by asking whether evolutionary theory can shed any light on the perennial question of the meaning of human existence. Just to give a sample of specific topics, the book explores

✓ The origins of language
✓ Why humans invented agriculture
✓ Economic exchange and capitalism
✓ Innate tastes
✓ Which humans drink milk and why
✓ Why some men have many wives
✓ Why some women have many husbands
✓ Where there is an incest taboo
✓ Why men and women seek different qualities in mates
✓ Why some people are gay rather than straight
✓ Whether there is a maternal instinct
✓ Why infanticide occurs
✓ The biology of gender
✓ Why status strivings exist and sometimes run amok
✓ Why people seek power
✓ Why people sometimes kill each other and why it is most often men who do so
✓ Why war is so common
✓ Whether there are biological races
✓ Whether racism is modern or ancient
✓ Why ethnic groups are frequently in conflict
✓ Why people are religious
✓ Why some religions have many gods and others only one
✓ Why atheism is on the rise
✓ Why people like art, music, and stories
✓ Why there is something rather than nothing, and why humans are part of the something
Some critics say that evolutionary arguments are mostly “just-so stories,” or made-up explanations that are provocative and interesting but are not supported by real evidence. But in fact there is a good deal of evidence, and in this book I have taken care to present some of the most important evidence for specific evolutionary claims. In the bibliography the many books that contain this evidence, and the specialized journals in which hundreds if not thousands of research articles have appeared, can be found.

To test evolutionary theories empirically it is necessary to study behavior in the full range of human societies that have ever existed. You can’t just study Americans or Westerners in general, or just people in any modern society east or west. You also have to look at behavior among people who live by hunting and gathering, by one or another type of agriculture, by animal herding, or by some combination of these. A historical perspective is necessary as well. What were people doing in ancient Egypt, ancient Rome, medieval Europe, or traditional China and India? And you need to explore human action in all of the major regions of the world, where some people live in grasslands, atop tall mountains, in deserts, in tropical rain forests, in hot, humid climates or bitterly cold ones, and so on. This sort of comparative and historical perspective is essential for understanding the similarities and differences in human behavior everywhere. It is essential to understand what thoughts and behaviors may be universal, what may be common but not universal, and what may be rare or not exist at all. No general principles of human behavior and human society can be developed without collecting these sorts of data.

I started out in sociology, but even as a graduate student I knew that a comparative perspective is crucial. The sociologists whose work I respected most were doing comparative research with a heavy dose of anthropology. After my PhD, I felt increasingly attracted to anthropology. Although I am officially a member of a sociology department, I am equally comfortable in both fields and, I believe, equally knowledgeable of both. I feel that this gives me something of an advantage because it allows me to grasp the many details of behavior in the entire range of human societies.

I have presented many of the ideas contained in this book in several courses I have taught over many years. I have always found the vast majority of students to be very receptive to them. (There are of course dissenters and those who can’t quite decide.) They have often said that it seems patently obvious that there should be such a thing as human nature, and they have been puzzled that many social scientists wish to deny this. In any event, you read the book and you decide.

As aids to the reader, each chapter contains a summary of the main points and a list of questions that you should be able to answer after reading the chapter. If you struggle to answer these questions, you had better go back and have another look. At the end of the book is a short list of technical terms and their definitions. These are boldfaced in the text.
Preface

I am indebted to many people who have contributed to my understanding of the ideas developed in this book, but they are far too numerous to thank individually. I would inevitably leave someone out, and then feelings would be hurt. The people who contributed most to the book's development once a first draft was finished were the reviewers solicited by the publisher: Jennie R. Brown, Franklin Pierce University; Jack David Eller, Community College of Denver; William F. McKibbin, University of Michigan–Flint; Benjamin Grant Purzycki, University of British Columbia; and Andreas Wilke, Clarkson University. I also owe a large debt of gratitude to my editor at Westview Press, Leanne Silverman. She resurrected my book proposal after the previous editor departed and it got buried, said she liked it, and solicited reviews of the book's first draft and another set of reviews of the second draft. This is my twelfth book, but I have never had an editor who got so directly involved. Leanne requested several revisions of some material, important clarifications and additions, and the removal of dubious assertions. She has undoubtedly improved the book greatly and has truly earned the title of editor. She made me work hard, but it has been a delight working with her.

Stephen K. Sanderson
Riverside, California
ARTIST'S CARICATURE OF CHARLES DARWIN  Darwin was the greatest biologist of all time. His theories of natural and sexual selection have had enormous impact on evolutionary biology, biological anthropology, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and several other academic disciplines.

(Courtesy of the Archives, California Institute of Technology)