

that Malaysian Islam is open to cross-cultural communication and modernisation; indeed that Malaysia's multicultural society demonstrates an attractive and feasible way forward. Another Malaysian contributor, Karim Raslan, says that the 'Middle east can no longer lay claim to leadership of the Muslim world . . . [given] the Arab world's moral, spiritual and socio-economic bankruptcy . . . Proponents of Wahabism . . . have done their utmost to promote their interpretations at the expense of regional cultures' (pp. 34-35).

Although, in the meantime, Southeast Asian fundamentalist Muslims have become mass murderers in Bali and Malaysia has been found to harbour terrorist enemies of Western liberal values, I agree that we should look at Malaysia and Indonesia to study a more attractive face of modern Islam and to develop Western strategies which help the modernisers and reformers. Europeans and Americans are much more likely to focus on Arab Islam than we do and are then seduced either into belligerent antagonism, such as Oriana Fallaci's new temperamental book *Rage and Pride*, or into politically correct pacifist cowardice. Neither posture looks promising. The West—and in particular Australia, which is a borderline state to Muslim Southeast Asia—is better served by understanding the modernisers and reformers of Islam who work in our region. Raslan's article presents an excellent starting point for us when setting out on the road of supporting reform, while at the same time standing up for the values that have served us so well and may inspire Muslim reformers.

Overall, the book at times strikes someone with a paleo-liberal world view with scepticism about the leaders'

and the WEF's naive belief in top-down collective action. As the title already indicates—'recreating' a huge, diverse entity called 'Asia'—there is too much trust in the wisdom of the leaders, proactive strategies, and collaboration between government and business, and too little stress on open competition, individualism and dissent, as well as arms-length governance. Having said this, the book contains a great diversity of worthwhile insights and questions. It documents that problems are being taken seriously and analysed intelligently. Alas, these are interesting times. Nevertheless, one gains the impression that the leaders whom WEF has assembled at least realise that they are facing unprecedented challenges.

Let me conclude with a probably futile wish. I hope that these essays are read by the street protesters against globalisation and capitalism, which WEF represents to them. That would enable them—or at least those who finance and manipulate them and their sympathisers—to make a constructive contribution to prosperity, peace and security for all.

Reviewed by Wolfgang Kasper

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature

Steven Pinker

Viking Penguin, 2002, 509pp,
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POLITICS and genetics have an unfortunate history. The Nazis' extermination of Jews and others deemed tainted by undesirable characteristics gave genetic 'improvement' a very bad name, and the pre-World War II interest in eugenics vanished from respectable

intellectual life. The idea that races differ in ways other than physical appearance remains one of the hottest of intellectual hot potatoes, as the mid-1990s controversy over Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* showed. While less explosive than racial differences, the belief that the sexes vary in more than just their bodies still gets at least men into trouble.

Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* is a very wide-ranging look at the science of human nature, what's genetic and what's not, and the social and political implications of this research. It's intended to calm some of the concerns people have about the findings of genetic research, by pointing out that some previous beliefs about genetics were wrong or misuses (the Nazis, for example), that the research does not have the negative moral or political implications some fear, but that it can tell us useful things about what social patterns are likely and what political arrangements are feasible.

Pinker provides evidence and arguments relevant to pacifying critics of genetic explanations of human behaviour and culture, though whether they are likely to do so is another matter, for reasons I will explain.

He points out that while there are genetic differences between races, they have much in common, including body and brain structure and universals of behaviour and beliefs. An appendix lists dozens of these universals. Wider genetic variation occurs within racial groups than between them, so individual discrimination based on average group characteristics cannot be justified on genetic grounds.

Similar arguments can be used for gender, though there are on Pinker's account larger differences between sexes than between races.

Men are far more likely to compete violently, have a much stronger desire for multiple sex partners, are better able to manipulate three dimensional objects and space in the mind, have a higher tolerance for pain, and a greater propensity to take risks. For some characteristics the sexes share, men tend to predominate at the extremes. For example, boys tend to predominate among both the learning disabled and the very bright. Women experience basic emotions more intensely, have more intimate social relationships, and are more attentive to infants and children.

None of this justifies discrimination against individuals of either sex but, as Pinker persuasively argues, it does explain why men and women on average differ in their interests, abilities and chosen occupations. Without any discrimination at all men are likely to be more numerous among engineers, physicists, and mathematicians, simply because these are areas of relative average male strength.

Pinker also shows why fears about genetic determinism are not well-founded, and why we will not as the result of genetic research have every defendant claiming that his (it is usually a him, for the above reasons) genes made him do it. While especially males have a capacity for violence, Pinker argues that the brain has contingent strategies for violence, used in particular circumstances. Societies can do much to inhibit violence, through deterrence and avoiding circumstances in which violence is triggered. As Pinker points out, 'today's docile Scandinavians descended from bloodthirsty Vikings', and murder rates in modern societies, even the relatively violent United States, are a fraction of what they were earlier in history.

Though the material is in *The Blank Slate* to allay these and many other fears about genetic explanations, I'm not sure how far the book will go in achieving that goal. The polemical style Pinker often adopts, while sometimes fun to read (political views *Policy* readers are unlikely to share get a particularly tough time), is as likely to alienate as persuade those who don't share his views. Often Pinker can't resist firing a few more intellectual bullets into an already dead set of beliefs, adding humiliation to correction.

His arguments on the old nature/nurture debate frequently suffer from being one-sided. While he believes that genes normally explain no more than 40% to 50% of variations in human attributes (that is, there is a very large share for environment, the nurture in the nature/nurture debate), the evidence and arguments offered overwhelmingly refer to genetic explanations. There's much more nature than nurture in the book than there is in life.

If the current conventional wisdom was badly imbalanced against genetics Pinker's own lopsidedness might make sense. As many reviewers have pointed out, though, Pinker sometimes exaggerates the extent to which it is generally believed that there is a 'blank slate', that there is no human nature and everything is 'socially constructed'. While he does not attack straw men (or straw women, in the case of feminists), the individuals he singles out for criticism are not necessarily representative of pervasive beliefs. It is doubtful that a blank slate model of human nature dominates the social sciences these days.

An alternative view is that social science emphasises the nurture part

of nature/nurture not because that's all there is, or even because ultimately that's necessarily the major determinant of behaviour, but because that's what we can change. As yet, we don't have the technology to produce widespread changes in human genetic make-up (and whether we should have it is the subject of other long books). This leaves environmental change.

Pinker knows this, and he praises social institutions that are well adapted to human nature, and criticises political philosophies that are ill-adapted to human nature, such as Marxism and all other forms of utopianism. Family ties, a limited propensity for sharing outside the family, and self-serving biases are all human traits that put limits on political change. Yet the structure of Pinker's book gives the impression that he sees genetics as more dominant than the evidence warrants.

I don't want to finish this review on a negative note. *The Blank Slate* is a well-written book with many interesting facts and arguments in addition to those already discussed—on why rape is primarily about sex and not power, the 'noble savage', the 'ghost in the machine', the genetic basis of political orientation, the relative role of parents and peers on how children turn out, the arts, Pinker's own speciality of language, and much else. Some historical beliefs about human nature are, on the evidence Pinker produces, wrong, as are the views of some academics in the arts and social sciences. In his relentless pursuit of the social constructionists, though, Pinker overkills. I suspect, on the basis of genetic propensities, that a woman would have written a more measured book.

Reviewed by Andrew Norton