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Sociobiology and Political Ideology: Comments on the Radical Point of View

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Political abuse of scientific research is a real danger in many domains of science. The case of sociobiology in particular needs extra alertness, by its scientific users as well as by its critics. Dissociation from any political exploitation of selected sociobiological hypotheses is an important intellectual duty for users of sociobiological reasoning. Leading sociobiologists appear to know their responsibility in this respect. However, depicting sociobiology as a new form of social Darwinism, which in essence is the conclusion of radical criticism, is a much more important source of bad reputation of sociobiology than actual political abuse itself. Projecting rightwing political claims in sociobiology as a theory is serving as a method to mobilize support against research which tries hard not to confuse the biological fact of inequality with the political right to equal treatment. In this article it is argued that critical use of sociobiological theory should not be too timid and defensive regarding charges of political abuse. Defensiveness helps to maintain an atmosphere in which guilt by association is preventing further development of sociobiological research.

In 1981 a Dutch book was published under the title *Sociobiology Discussed*, containing debates on several aspects of sociobiology by proponents and opponents. The very last phrase of this book was an important question: "Is sociobiology a societal danger, and if so, is this because of abuse of sociobiological theories, or are the theories themselves morally bad?" (de Waal, 1981, p. 267). This is quite an important question because by associating the bad reputation of social-Darwinist interpretation of evolutionary theory with sociobiology, the charge of sociobiology being merely a right-wing or even fascist ideology must be taken very seriously by everyone who is interested in applying hypotheses and results of behavioural biology, especially in the field of social science.

Charges against sociobiology have been launched by, for example, the American "Science for the People Group" (in Caplan, 1978, p. 280-290), more recently by "The Dialectics of Biology Group", and by critics like Rose (1982a, b) and Lewontin (1983), to mention only the best known. In general, the main charge is that sociobiology is not a science, but only a politically coloured vision on man and society, and in fact the newest brand of traditional biological determinism. Lewontin's words are characteristic:

Theories of the physical body and the body politic come together in biological determinism, an ideology that both justifies current social arrangements and claims them to be the inevitable consequences of the facts of life. For sociobiologists and believers in natural meritocracies of class and sex, the properties of society are determined by the intrinsic properties of individual human beings, individuals are the expression of their genes, and genes are nothing but self-replicating molecules. We are selfish because we are formed by selfish DNA. As Richard Dawkins puts it in *The Selfish Gene*, we are "lumbering robots" controlled "body and mind" by our genes. So politics becomes a branch of molecular biology, and our social and political institutions are immutable as the chemicals of which we are made (Lewontin, 1983 p. 34-35).

According to him and other critics sociobiology reflects all kinds of socio-economic prejudices, excuses the political *status quo*, and ultimately even leads to or supports the philosophy of the gas-chamber: science in service of social control by the powerful. Steven

Rose argues that in their main works sociobiologists give more insight into themselves and their political way of thinking than into reality, and that the limited reductionist approach of the sociobiologists has as an *aim* to support ideological suppression of the masses.

Apparently, sociobiology is associated with social-Darwinism which was used by social philosophers to explain and justify the social situation in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century. For example, the conduct of war was considered as a morally acceptable affair in those heydays of imperialism. War had to be pursued because evolutionary theory told that there is a struggle for existence in which the fittest would survive. War was considered desirable, because it would give way to the strongest, in accordance with the theory of selection; and because that selection was "natural", it was also morally good. The same was assumed to hold for internal state affairs: the less intervention the better; hence no social policy or any other obstruction of the natural course of affairs was recommended.

Meanwhile we have come to know the later consequences of the usage of this biologized reasoning for political purposes: racism, discrimination, persecution and extermination of the Jews, gypsies and other minorities in World War II. Ever since, it has been very difficult to become dissociated from social-Darwinism when trying to apply ideas from social biology on human affairs. I think this is the main reason for the human social sciences up till now to keep at great distance from all kinds of evolutionary and biological functionalist theories of social life. The fear for political infection is not unjustified indeed. From the first signs of sociobiology on, only a few years after protests against the Nobel Prize being awarded to Lorenz [because of his wartime articles supporting German racist marriage law (Lorenz, 1940)], warnings were issued against abuse of sociobiology for political purposes.

It is true that these fears became reality, for instance in several publications of the National Front where sociobiology is explicitly quoted in support of racism and nationalism. The same kind of abuse has been reported about extreme right-wing organizations in France, like the *Club d'Horloge* and a similar Flemish political organization used selected sociobiological arguments as justifications for acts of violence (Dickson, 1979). We do not need a more detailed discussion of these reported examples for rejecting unambiguously as unacceptable the political exploitation of any part of sociobiology. At the same time we should be very alert at new instances of such abuse, and if they rise again, users of sociobiological reasoning have the special moral and intellectual duty to dissociate themselves clearly from them. In fact, well-known sociobiologists have precisely done that (Dawkins, 1981, and Wilson, 1981, in reaction to Rose, 1981). Nevertheless it is remarkable how rare this kind of "heavy" political abuse is. Much more often attention is given to the alleged sexist prejudices in sociobiology because of intensive research on sex differences in behaviour. In contrast to the direct abuse of sociobiology in legitimization of racism or use of violence, here it concerns the prejudices of sociobiologists themselves, so the argument goes (Alper, 1981; Sayers, 1982, and Ruse, 1981).

Although we cannot and should not deny the actual and potential abuse of selected sociobiological themes for political purposes, it can be said in defence of sociobiology that it is not acceptable to hold exactly sociobiology *itself* responsible for its being abused, and by implication reject sociobiology as a bad social philosophy. Archaeology in Nazi Germany, modern Israel, and Western Africa gives another example of science being abused to support contemporary, political claims, in this case providing the righteousness of these claims with historical "proofs". Here, archaeology was, and still is, a willing technical tool in the hands of politicians (van der Waals, 1980). Sociobiology, as a theory, can also be

used as such a willing tool. It is clear that, in distinction of archaeology, sociobiological theory itself contains more readily accessible points of contact for abuse. But still there is a fundamental and unbridgeable difference between the scientific-theoretical construction that is called sociobiology, and the decision to use some sociobiological hypotheses as legitimation for one's own political purposes. This is an important difference without which every science could be held *directly* responsible for any abuse, no matter how defined.

As I have stated before, the charges of sociobiology being a right-wing ideology are mainly associated with political aims which are infamous in the eyes of the critics and have to be fought. I think that attempts to expose sociobiology as an ideology rest on two general points:

- (1) the conception of how an ideology works out in social life; and
- (2) the distinction between scientific theories and social philosophies.

The radical critics use a conception of ideology which originated with Marx and Engels, and which interprets ideology as a systematic attempt to demonstrate the rationality of the existing distribution of wealth, and of the social attitude and order in which the wealthy hold positions of power. Ideology, which is always *bourgeois* in this school of thinking, is an apology for institutionalized inequality and produces a false consciousness among the people. It is this false consciousness which enables covering up the existing social inequalities. Religious beliefs are classic examples. Ideology, in this view, is thus a coherent system of social thinking, the coherence being produced by the *aim* of the group or individual. So, it is this *political aim* that characterizes ideology, and that distinguishes it from other kinds of philosophy.

The point here is that sociobiology as a theory does not contain explicit or implicit political aims, and that it certainly does not suffer from the old social-Darwinist failure of the "naturalistic fallacy", which means that uncritically is concluded that "what is", also "should be". In the words of Wilson (1981, p. 627): "The 'what is' in human nature is to a large extent the heritage of a Pleistocene hunter-gatherer existence. When any genetic connection is demonstrated, it cannot be used to justify continuing practice in present and future societies." Sociobiology *as a theory* does not contain political aims. Since Kant we know that the difference between "is" and "ought" is never to be bridged by science, and political aims belong to the realm of the "ought".

All this is not meant to deny the theme of value in various sociobiological works. For example, Wilson (1978) quite obviously expressed his fear of some total disaster, and mentioned the need to plan the future for the sake of the general good. That implied considering values of survival of the human condition, genetic variation, and even human rights. Nevertheless, that appeal was made to values laying outside sociobiology, and outside evolutionary theory itself. There is no attempt—there could be no successful scientific attempt—to arrive at these ethical conclusions from the foundation of evolutionary theory itself: one cannot simply derive moral values from the course of evolution.

This is a very fundamental point. Yet I think that it is exactly via such reasoning that some critics of sociobiology leave the path of science, and take the profitable road of political use of sociobiology—though being quite different from the other forms of political use of biology mentioned before. My thesis is that the radical critics, who make great fuss of undesirable political use of sociobiology, themselves are the main and not least dangerous ideological abusers of sociobiology. An illustration is the in radical circles widely shared basic argument (also to be recognized in Lewontin's quote at the beginning of this article),

that sociobiology is not only a bad scientific theory—which is not of our concern here—but that it is also a bad theory because of the societal consequences which might be concluded from it. In general, such critics confuse the biological fact of inequality with the political right on equal treatment. Until that confusion is solved, there will remain a tension between the ideology—in this case absolute political equality—and the evolutionary functionalism which describes organisms on the basis of their chances of survival and reproduction. In my opinion, also the charges of sociobiology being racist, sexist, anti-homosexual, and so on, originate from this kind of questionable interpretation of evolutionary adaptivity in sociobiology, connected with unwillingness to distinguish that what is from that what ought to be. Although in quite another sense, exactly the same is to be noticed in the political abuse of sociobiology in the National Front ideology.

Anyone who is unable to make this distinction between “is” and “ought”, has also difficulties with the relationship between science and politics. When we agree that science consists of theorizing, searching after laws and regularities, producing explanations and testable hypotheses, then certainly no norms are deducible from science itself. If the standards of science, as applied to sociobiology by the radical critics, would be applied to other sciences as well—certainly to the social sciences—then little valuable would be left. Less-biased analysts agree that sociobiology, including human sociobiology, produces reasonable theses, even though this set of hypotheses is sometimes in conflict with other sets of hypotheses. In that perspective the charge of sociobiology being cryptofascist pseudoscience or ideologically prejudiced, is not correct (Ruse, 1981, ch. 8).

Politics, on the other hand, is in the first place the *choice* to use or abuse any kind of values, ideas of science, or whatever, in order to influence the behaviour of other individuals (in a strict sense, politics concerns the question of who gets what, when and how, or, more sophisticated, the question of the authoritative allocation of values for a society; in a wider sense, the view can be taken that *every* human interaction does influence to some extent the behaviour of other (groups of) individuals (De Vree, 1982, ch. 4; for a stimulating vision on politics in a non-human context, see de Waal, 1982).

Quite another point is that one may not like the phenomena as described by sociobiology as a theory, e.g. sex differences, altruism, and aggression. When one's personal appreciation is mixed up with theorizing—as in the case of much radical criticism—the classical error of rejecting the (as unpleasantly perceived) truth, or its theoretical construction, is made, in this case as having nothing to do with biology, because it would allegedly be testifying deterministic thinking after all. Admittedly, correcting such cognitive dissonance, that is, to harmonize one's disturbed world-picture, usually demands strong effort.

The reason for the emergence of most of the radical opposition, then, is, in my opinion, that the fundamental, biological approach of human behaviour more or less questions political ideology itself; this applies especially to ideologies starting from the *tabula rasa* conception of man, assuming a practically unlimited plasticity. And of course the endangering of vested myths never passes unnoticed by their supporters. In the present sociobiological case, the historical debate provoked by Darwin's own theory of evolution can serve as an illustration: there is a remarkable parallel between the fierce reactions from Darwin's contemporary religious world, and those of some modern radicals. The 19th century religious critics demonstrated to have been attacked in their values, particularly the value of believing in a divine creation of man and animal. Christian belief was said to be

undermined, although this was absolutely not Darwin's aim (Glick, 1974; Colp, 1977). One wonders whether the same type of reaction exists in the case of sociobiology.

For me it is clear that such potential disillusion of some political ideology is certainly not a purpose of scientists having constructed sociobiological theory. In fact, it is only a side effect of relativizing the classical anthropocentric view we are witnessing today, especially in the social sciences. That relativization indirectly exerts influence on the sciences as well. The picture of man as a creature with limited capacities, while being able to perform a lot but certainly not everything, is causing so much resistance because it implies a sceptical view of many political ideals. Behind the whole discussion about the ideological implications of sociobiology, one can clearly discern the collision between "biological realism"—which as such finds no basis in values—and "societal idealism" in which values are the central issues.

Sociobiology in general, and human sociobiology in particular, are certainly not ideologies or doctrines meant for keeping people in their present state of oppression. Sociobiology does suggest, however, that to come out of that present state, one needs understanding the latter's origin and hence a social *and* an evolutionary-biological approach of human behaviour are required. It does suggest, furthermore, that change will not be as straightforward, as many environmentalists prefer, or lacking any deleterious side-effects. On the other hand, it is equally important to note that sociobiology does not imply that we are necessarily and forever prisoners of our Pleistocene past: there is nothing in sociobiology which denies the importance of environmental factors.

In conclusion, it seems to be this secondary, non-intended *effect* interfering with some fundamental aspects of ideology which lies at the basis of the whole fuss about labelling sociobiology as a "socially dangerous ideology". There is much to argue in favour of the thesis that this charge addressed to sociobiology is more fed by the critics of sociobiology who are themselves strongly ideologically motivated than by the abject signs as apparent from National Front publications and other examples. Their supporters are, for that matter, much fewer and certainly less influential than the critics trying to keep society free from "bad social philosophies", like sociobiology. Although, thus, I consider these ideologically inspired claims as heavily overdone and certainly not free of political self-interest (even if possibly unconsciously present), these charges appear to have come to lead a life of their own.

This can be demonstrated by an advice of the official Dutch Advisory Council for Science Policy (Raad, 1981). This Council proposed to nominate a so-called National Ombudsman for the sciences, supposed to investigate societal critics on scientific research. Smaller committees were suggested to produce reports and advices on new scientific developments supposed having socially critical or undesirable consequences. Of course, these criticisms have to be founded on solid arguments. The interesting point, now, is that in the list of research topics falling under this category, sociobiology figures as a prominent example (next to nuclear energy, cloning of hereditary material, and, of course, recombinant DNA). This example was included on the basis of "a social-cultural/ethical unacceptability of the premises and starting points connected with certain kinds of research, like sociobiology" (Raad, 1981 p. 10). Because the Council had taken sociobiology only as an example, that qualification was not argued any further. Meanwhile, sociobiology has been criminalized in this official publication, and in its wake by a leading Dutch newspaper, once more adding to the bias that sociobiology and social-Darwinism are just more of the same.

The idea behind the advice to establish a national ombudsman for the sciences was that there is a need for such critical watching, because, according to the Council (and many others), science is developing without any public influence. Although the national discussion has not finished yet, fortunately the Dutch scientific community has shown reservations about such plans, though other difficulties are still lying ahead. For example, the Council could not yet decide on the question of whether *all* forms of research should be subjected to this procedure. Some members thought yes, but others have put forward that fundamental research, only directed at collecting knowledge, does not need to be subjected to some kind of social judgement. The reasoning is that collecting of knowledge is a cultural activity for which the freedom of the researcher has to be maintained.

Much more difficult and principal is the question where the demarcation between pure and applied (or applicable) science and research is to be located. Although sociobiology evidently belongs to research directed at increasing knowledge, its case can be used to demonstrate that the answer to the above question is ultimately a political one, depending on one's opinion towards the role and the position of science in society in general. That is to say, if every human interaction is considered to have, anyhow, influence on the behaviour of other (groups of) individuals, then scientific research is evidently a good example of political behaviour in the wide sense. As a political scientist, I do not object to this perspective at all. But that is something quite else than arguing that this or that field of science is ideologically inferior or politically abject. In that case certain political values are used as exclusive points of reference (which are irrelevant from a scientific point of view), rather than internal consistency of theories and their testability (which, admittedly, pose always difficulties—in the case of sociobiology, like in other fields).

While all this does not, of course, deny the importance of personal values and social responsibilities, as I have argued before, scientific truth, no matter how difficult to assess or how trivial it may seem, is never something to be controlled by whatever majority of the people or the scientific elite. To be sure, inevitably society sets limits to the funds needed to do research and also sets limits on *how* to do research (this would, normally, exclude Mengele's type of research). But deciding *additionally* on *what* (not) to investigate introduces necessarily forces not primarily interested in science, but in political power in the narrower sense. Introducing any kind of official screening body—irrespective of its democratic quality—will reflect and exert pure political influence, probably resulting in some kind of official or unofficial censorship (additional to the already existing very influential university bureaucracies). At least, it will be very difficult to prevent this to happen once political screening is institutionalized. Now already public opinion is mobilized via the mass media, like, for instance, occurred in the case of biocriminology at Leyden University, Netherlands, where unconventional research was performed to discover possible genetic defects in some type of criminals. Unfortunately, this unconventional research became politically very unpopular, and so it was an easy prey in the first cuts of expenditure (dressed up with the argument that the output was too low).

So, I think there is good reason for sociobiologists and those who feel inspired by sociobiology, not to be *too* timid and defensive when they, or their field of science, are again accused of politically and morally abject attitudes. To be sure, this is a modern variation of an old theme (Young, 1971; Alexander, 1980). Many radical critics themselves are the ones who most promote abuse of science, including sociobiology.

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