

Review of Jon D. Wisman’s *The Origins and Dynamics of Inequality: Sex, Politics, and Ideology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, ix + 507 pp.

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Evolutionary explanations for human behaviour are often invoked by students in the philosophy classroom. Hobbes’ ([1651] 2012) contractual agreement between individuals operating in a context of mistrust, self-preservation, and scarce resources, is sometimes assessed according to findings from evolutionary psychology. Students point to ‘hardwired’ tendencies towards both self-interest and cooperation which could either corroborate or undermine (Grund et al. 2013; Silk and House 2011) Hobbes’ view of human nature as generating a war of all against all. Discussions on the gendered division of (reproductive) labour can veer into debates concerning the point at which social construction is supposed to begin, and so-called biologically determined roles end (Erickson and Shakespeare 2001). The ideas of family abolition and the universalism that underpins it, face obstacles such as the apparent immutability of partiality and the evolutionarily mandated limit of 150 people to whom we can show concern for at any one time (Lindenfors et al. 2021).

Referring students to the contested nature of such findings does not (and nor should it) quash their curiosity in this area. The tendency to seek to evaluate moral theories on the basis of their cohering with our ‘real’ capacities as humans is understandable. Insights from evolutionary theory may also serve to destabilise the purely self-interested utility-maximising *homo economicus* model of human behaviour that dominates our political order, by revealing that people ‘naturally’ care about ‘fairness’, for example (Wisman 2022). The question remains as to whether we should let emerging scientific theories direct our moral theorising, however. Even if evolution has shaped the content of our moral beliefs, it remains plausible that autonomous moral reflection and reasoning also played a part, as they did with our mathematical, scientific and philosophical beliefs (FitzPatrick 2021).

Now there exists a *political* text to consult for related questions, which draws upon evolutionary biology in its analysis of the socioeconomic

order. Jon D. Wisman's *The Origins and Dynamics of Inequality* (2022) is an unusual feat, not least due to its exceptionally clear and absorbing prose. Providing a detailed overview of the history of human development, Wisman argues that extreme material inequality is not a "naturally necessary part of the human condition" (3). Rather, such inequality arose following the development of the state and 'civilisation'. Prior to this, homo sapiens existed for around 200,000 years in a condition of relative political and economic equality. When living as nomadic foragers, humans were able to move on to greener pastures in the face of scarcity, and wars with other bands weren't worth fighting due to the easy availability of flight. The absence of private property contributed to an egalitarian incentive structure that rewarded the sharing of "food, child care, and practically everything else" (26). As labour was not coerced by unequal social power, it was not viewed as intrinsically unpleasant. Indeed, work and leisure were not clearly demarcated and were frequently combined. Men and women worked in partnership, and although their tasks varied, they had similar work and schedules (222).

Such societies were also typically non-hierarchical, but the need for chiefs arose as populations grew and remained static, requiring assistance with complex social coordination problems. The adoption of agriculture as a principle means of subsistence about 10,000 years ago served as a precondition for the rise of the state and civilisation, private property, subjugation, and extreme inequality (99). Excess food could be produced and stored, leading to wealth accumulation. The delayed returns of agriculture led to producers being relatively trapped geographically, "meaning that survival would be difficult should they leave their investments" (100). Living in such settlements made producers more vulnerable to domination by those who could acquire disproportionate power. Men acquired greater such power and prestige through being skilled in things like leadership in raiding and headhunting as well as in entrepreneurial exchange (102). The status of such "high achievers" was legitimated by the clan's religious cosmology, serving to justify hierarchy, and foreshadowing the central place that ideology came to have in making inequality acceptable, even to the worse off (105).

Prior to the rise of the state and civilisation around 5,500 years ago, the special status of these elites and leaders was fragile—they lacked the military capability to enforce their privileges, and calamities such as poor harvests could dissolve their control over communities (134). However, advances in metallurgy and military organisation, as well as

developments in legitimating ideologies, empowered elites to gain ownership and control of the means of production. They used this control to extract practically all of the surplus that workers produced beyond what was necessary for subsistence (134), and “thus was born the state, run by a powerful elite with a comparable advantage in violence, enabling them to live on the surplus production of the masses” (137).

This may all sound like explanation enough for the development and persistence of inequality. But Wisman wants to go beyond these historically contingent expressions of human behaviour and identify an ultimate driving force. He seeks to locate inequality in a conception of our biological human nature, specifically Darwinian sexual competition. The fundamental idea is that Charles Darwin’s account of sexual selection—the evolutionary need to be successful in mating—is the foundation of all inequality. Due to the fact that we are “biologically-driven to reproduce,” we “compete for status” (6) in order to be attractive to certain mates. We are instinctually driven to ensure that our unique set of genes survive into the future, whether we view our own existence this way or not.

On this view, “each member of each gender is in competition with all others of the same gender in a zero-sum game as to whose genes will make it into future generations” (37). Such competition can be productively channelled, stimulating invention and generating technological change, or it can lead to widespread material inequality. Historically, our innate sense of fairness has served as a constraint on sexual competition, “preventing alpha males from monopolizing reproductive rights” (6). A reputation for playing fairly was considered sexually attractive (62). While humans are programmed to seek status, what counts as high status is cultural, depending upon the institutional rules of the game (69). Wisman emphasises that “females were more focused on social or cultural rather than physical characteristics” (40). Men apparently privilege external appearances in seeking a (female) partner, although it is not clear why this should be the case for humans, given it is the male peacock who possesses the flamboyant, enticing feathers. Women are claimed to be attracted to a range of skills and capabilities in men, such as being a skilled hunter, gifted storyteller, or an artist. As civilisations developed, elites were able to establish harems, gaining sexual access to many of women, apparently “corroborating Darwin’s thesis that the ultimate driver of competition aims at success in reproduction” (189). Now, we live according to norms that direct us to hoard wealth and engage in conspicuous consumption, emulating elite behaviour. Thus, our innate sexual competition

needs re-directing. If we want to remedy socioeconomic inequality, we need to change our institutions and shift incentives away from excessive individual wealth accumulation. We need to make egalitarianism sexy again!

So, we are to “Blame It on Sex” (33). Everything comes down to the drive to reproduce. It is in this attempt to provide a unified, totalising theory that the book seeks to prove too much. As I outlined earlier, a convincing story about the origins of a persisting level of material inequality could be told without the Darwinian conjecture. Being primarily a study in history, the book does not consider philosophical arguments against the teleological view of human beings as organisms made to reproduce. Nor does it consider arguments from feminist philosophy of science which suggest the scientific method itself fails to be objective and can be imbued with bias in the construction of hypotheses (Wylie 2003). It bears noting that Darwin developed his account of sexual selection in an attempt to explain the existence of discrete human races, after recognising that natural selection could not serve this function. Thus, sexual selection was proposed as an additional selective mechanism of evolutionary change: differences in sexual preferences were said to have driven the creation of different races. Darwin’s work has thus been located “within the structures of racism that became the governing principles of modern nation states” (Sheldon 2021). Finally, this book does not meaningfully engage with internal critiques of Darwinian thought, such as scholarship that challenges Darwin’s account of sexual selection (Roughgarden 2007; Liker et al. 2021, Ah-King 2022). As a result, the sex-based explanation for inequality remains difficult to uncritically accept.

Setting aside the biological underpinnings upon which this work seeks to depend, there also appear to be some ambiguities on the political front. Wisman’s culminating defence of private property comes as a surprise after such a rich and convincing portrait has been painted about the role private property played in dispossessing foraging communities, for whom “all of nature was humanity’s commons” (153). Referencing state-generated bondage, Wisman suggests that civilisation does not unequivocally denote progress, precisely because “natural resources were not owned or controlled” (153) prior to this. Yet, private property, as long as its ownership is not concentrated, is apparently not the problem. If workers democratically owned the means of production, it is suggested that we would not have material inequality and work would not be alienated, as it would be on the workers’ own terms (428). Wisman is intent on

labelling such a situation ‘capitalist’, even if *everyone* is part of the productive wealth-owning class (444). This could be because he also wants to retain the function of markets in allocating goods (421), although it is not explained how precisely markets might be controlled to mitigate vulnerability and exploitation in exchange.

Wisman has a lot of faith in the franchise to bring about this political change (458), which is also surprising in light of his compelling exploration of a deep-seated inequality-legitimizing ideology, and earlier admission that elites “discovered that democracy could be contained” (316). Education, formal and otherwise, is supposedly the key to liberating people from ideology. This doesn’t quite feel like a satisfactory proposal, however, when education, under the backdrop of said ideology, often reproduces hierarchy, objectionable norms, and utopia-constraining dogmas, while professing to objectivity. There are also some points where Wisman’s account of ideology does not go far enough. He claims, for example, that “as a rule, elites do not act in bad faith” (21). Rather, they genuinely believe the doctrines that further their interests and “do not view them as self-serving ideologies” (126). Rather than consciously conspiring to craft ideologies that will legitimate their privileges, elites “gravitate spontaneously toward those ideas that support their interests” (20). It is difficult to reconcile this claim with the widespread existence of corporate lobbying strategies and a billionaire-owned mass media that wields its power to play decisive roles in elections. Wisman recognises that the elite dominate the energy industries, for example, and therefore have private interests in maintaining an anti-environmental stance, interfering with legislation to that end (393). It seems hard to imagine that such elites believe in climate change denial *in earnest*. Was it a genuine belief in the individual’s role in carbon emissions that led BP to use an advertising firm to create the carbon footprint calculator in 2004, successfully displacing its corporate responsibility for carbon emissions onto all of us? (Fraser 2023)

Further, Wisman blames the failure of voices who represent workers to gain power on their proposals being too diverse and unfocused, and their positions being frightening (448). In using the passive voice when claiming that “such voices are too easily slammed by the elite’s ideological trump card—the claim that they lead to socialism and totalitarianism” (448), Wisman neglects the direct role of elites in bringing down figures hostile to their interests. There is widespread evidence, for example, including WhatsApp communication between complicit senior staff, that

the socialist former leader of the UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, was sabotaged by officials within his own party. Such officials intentionally undermined the Labour Party's electoral chances (Nunns, forthcoming). These examples suggest more than a tacit gravitation towards helpful ideas.

Ought we 'blame it on sex', therefore? Why rest material inequality on an already-controversial theory, indeed without sufficiently acknowledging the plausible shortcomings of an evolutionary perspective? Ought we blame it on sex when this narrative does not seem to cohere with how we typically view our decision-making? Ought we blame it on sex when most people are able to find partners and reproduce, even those occupying a so-called 'low status'? Finally, ought we blame it on sex when the kind of ideology favoured by elites in the legitimization of inequality might have infiltrated Darwinian thought itself?

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