



## Book Review

*Biology at Work: Rethinking Sexual Equality* by Kingsley R. Browne.  
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Reviewed by D. M. Procida and Carol Jones

Browne's premise, though bound to raise the eyebrows of those who feel that the question of sexual equality is one that belongs to *their* disciplines, is reasonable enough and is no doubt overdue for a serious hearing. That is, according to him, the social sciences (in particular) have arrived at a notion of sexual equality based upon a false picture of human nature, one which inadequately recognises its biological and evolutionary provenance. It is this notion of equality which has been allowed to drive public policy, inform legal decision-making and colour popular attitudes concerning the relative status of the sexes. Paying proper attention to the biology of human nature will grant us a better understanding of sex differences, and will help us separate those imbalances in the relations between the sexes which are iniquitous from those which are simply, and literally, facts of life.

On this basis Browne (a lawyer rather than a biologist) discusses sex differences in temperament and cognitive ability, before applying his findings to such issues as pay differentials between the sexes and the under-representation of women in top jobs. Later chapters seek to show that the sex differences responsible for

the imbalance in earning power and employment status between men and women are best explained by biological, and not sociological, analyses. His conclusions are then brought to bear on public policy concerning these issues, and finally to outline an analysis of sexual harassment in the workplace.

One cannot judge a book by its cover. One would be forgiven, though, for hoping that its title might represent its contents. Liberals, radicals, feminists, Marxists and socialists have spent much of the last one hundred and fifty years wrestling over the concept of equality, while in recent decades biology has been making ever more confident contributions to the debates of the humanities and social sciences. *Biology at Work: Rethinking Sexual Equality* suggests, therefore, that a new and richly-laden intervention may be at hand, for, like it or not (and many in the humanities and social sciences do not) biology's excursions beyond its more traditional remit have been one of the great academic success stories of recent years. However, what has characterised these successes has been the willingness of biologists to participate in those debates, and their ability to do so convincingly. There are on the other hand numer-

ous examples where attempts to extend biology's reach have failed on just these points: they neither participate nor convince. *Biology at Work* is, unfortunately, in this latter camp.

Perhaps Browne is right that the social sciences have served us with a false picture of human nature. But it is hard to know what to make of his own picture of the social sciences. The first sentence on page one asserts a long-standing 'virtual orthodoxy in the social sciences ... according to which observed differences between the sexes are mere "social constructions"'. This frankly amazing claim sets the tone for much of his criticism. It is followed two pages later with an account of the 'Standard Social Sciences Model', which apparently denies that human biology might have important implications for human behaviour or society, or for different male and female natures, and instead attributes human behaviour nearly exclusively to social conditioning. This might more accurately be called the Social Sciences Straw Man, but at any rate Browne sets about it with vigour. His enthusiasm for erecting imaginary opponents resurfaces at regular intervals. Often it is accompanied by another strategy, in which he reduces a complex issue to a simple duality: on one side his favoured position, and on the other a monolithic caricature to represent all the others. So, for example, in his discussion of the 'glass ceiling' he asks whether there is a programme of discrimination to hold women back in their careers. Finding none, he concludes that human biological nature is the major factor limiting women's ascent in corporate hierarchies. Similarly, discovering no conspiracy (such terms are his own) to discourage female students from certain scientific subjects, he concludes that their lower numbers and poorer results in those subjects represents the sexes' different biological dispositions.

Feminism gets the same treatment. In fact most of his references to feminism are rarely to feminist theory or to feminist thinkers. Instead they are to 'many feminists' (as in 'many feminists claim'), a convenient term which simulta-

neously suggests that he is describing the general position of a monolithic movement while liberating him from the obligation to identify, quote or engage with actual feminists' claims. As with the social sciences, it is hard to know what to make of his understanding of feminism. Only the barest acquaintance with feminism is required to know that the concept of equality is the single greatest controversy within it, as it has been for over one hundred and thirty years. Within feminism, equality has been subject to debate about what it is, whether it is a good thing, and if so, how to achieve it. The one thing it manifestly isn't is part of an orthodoxy.

His obvious unfamiliarity with some of the disciplines and movements he castigates not only serves to undermine his arguments, but also robs him of some of the resources that he could otherwise most profitably draw upon. The notion of sexual equality has received some of its most important reinterpretations and challenges from feminism, including some which are entirely consonant with his own claims for sexual difference. None of them get to make an appearance in this book. Instead, the equality he wants to rethink seems to be the equality-as-parity that enjoyed a relatively brief flowering in the economically-minded Anglophone liberal feminist tradition thirty-five years ago, and which has been pretty comprehensively rethought already.

A different example of Browne's blinding narrowness of vision is represented in the overall scope of the book. The universal human biology which peers back in time to scrutinise our origins is deployed to illuminate the relative standing of the sexes - in the corporate sector, in North America, under late capitalism. In itself this choice might be nothing worse than slightly incongruous, or lacking a sense of grandeur. However, Browne gives the impression not merely that he happily accepts the terms of a liberal capitalist ideology, but has little sense that there might be alternatives beyond those terms. Accordingly, even his biological explanations and analyses are strongly

tinged with, even couched in the terms of, the political stances the biology is supposed to defend.

At worst, his faith in the values of the liberal capitalist society he inhabits is genuinely alarming. He uses, as part of the evidence that men are more inclined to self-sacrificing risk-taking, 'a study of the recipients of awards granted by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. Of the 676 acts of heroism recognised from 1989 through 1995, 92 percent were performed by males.' (20) The possibility that this might say more about cultural values and Hero Fund Commissions than biological facts is not one he appears to entertain, and it seems extraordinary that the implications of this should pass him by. The fact that black Americans comprise 13 percent of the general population but 49 percent of the prison population has been used in much the same way to draw conclusions about racial propensities to criminality. It really should not be hard, especially for a lawyer, to see what might be troublesome about this mode of argument.

What is wrong in all of this is not that he has reached the wrong conclusions. They may well be right, even if many will find them unpalatable. But his arguments are not adequate to them, and the serious and profound inadequacies in his arguments and understanding make it hard to take his positions seriously. Worse, this damages, by association, the more respectable evidence and lines of argument that he brings forward. To take one example, he notes that unequal numbers of men and women at the top of corporate hierarchies cannot, in themselves,

be evidence of sexism at work *today*: since it can take decades to reach those positions, one must first consider the numbers of men and women entering the sector twenty or thirty years ago before judging what those numbers mean now. This is a salient point, and one not often acknowledged in complaints about the glass ceiling. In fact there is no shortage of insights. Browne has numerous others to offer, derived from similar analyses of socio-economic statistics, from biology's work, and elsewhere. Some are genuinely surprising, and many are genuinely compelling. But what function can these glimmers of compelling argument play in the whole, when they are bound up with dysfunctional reasoning and an almost thoroughgoing lack of engagement with what ought to be his interlocutors?

Feminists and social scientists will be rightly irritated by Browne's misrepresentation of their claims. But in fact it is the biologists, and those who look to biology for social explanation, for whom this book will be the greatest disappointment; it is a volume of wasted opportunities, and insights which should have been, but weren't, part of a convincing argument. No doubt biology will soon enough make its contribution to this particular debate, but those who have been waiting for it will be waiting a little longer.

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