



## Book Review

*Y: The Descent of Men* by Steve Jones  
2002, Little, Brown.

Reviewed by D. M. Procida

It used to be a man's man's man's world, but maybe it isn't anymore. Man's claim on the world is undoubtedly contested now more strongly than ever before. Partly this has been feminism's work, which has made explicit claims for power on behalf of women. Partly it is an effect of changed economic circumstances, in the West at least, in which the roles of breadwinners and homekeepers have unravelled out of long-preserved ideological fixity. Other social and historical movements have loosened man's grip on his world, whether long slow trends (the decline of marriage) or short sharp shocks (the world wars which brought Western women into the workplace). Birth control technologies mean that women can shake off the most burdensome of biology's impositions to contest man's claim all the more effectively. Worse, there's the other side of modern reproductive technology's coin: not only can women not have babies if they don't want to, they don't need men to have babies if they do want them. And now, it seems, not only men and masculinity, but maleness itself, is under threat - sperm counts are falling, fish are changing sex, and scientists are publishing worried papers on the 'feminisation' of nature.

One effect of men's new-found state of increasing weakness and impending pointlessness is that they have suddenly become visible *as men*. Men, masculinity and maleness are now experiencing a level of attention - from science, medicine, literature, sociology, psychology and an extraordinary legion of self-help writers - that until now only women and other aberrant forms of humanity have enjoyed. This is entirely natural: in a man's man's man's world the one thing which doesn't get noticed is maleness. In a man's world, it's everything else which stands out. In a man's world, there are issues and women's issues, magazines and women's magazines, medicine and women's medicine, studies and women's studies. This was the case, and now it isn't, and just as men's place in the world is losing its certainty it is gaining attention. "A man would never set out to write a book on the peculiar situation of the human male," wrote de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. But fifty years later the human male's peculiar situation commands shelf upon shelf in bookstores, and Steve Jones, geneticist, has added a new volume to the respectable part of the collection.

So, what has the new science of male-

ness to say? Jones is wary of saying too much. “Animals have males, but only *Homo sapiens* has manhood. As a result, genes say a great deal about sex, but rather little about gender” (8). The failure to understand this distinction, he says, condemns to confusion those who believe that biology explains nothing, or everything, about humanity. Only thirty years ago a character in Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* could say “I thought we’d driven biological explanation right out of sociology. I thought we were through with all that shit.” In the short intervening period sociology has become obsessed with biology, and biology is asked to be the universal *explanandum* of humanity. Jones is critical of both these tendencies. His own preferred method is to draw upon all the disciplines which speak on the subject. So, beginning with the chromosome upon which men rely for their maleness and after which this marvellous book is named, Jones sets out a bright and entertaining negotiation of the peculiar situation of his own sex.

Sexual difference is a cellular imbalance. Every second, the world’s men produce two hundred thousand billion sperm (about a million litres of semen a day, he notes happily) which result in five births. The world’s women, though, produce a mere 400 eggs each second. This might suggest that the male contribution to the reproductive party is some five hundred billion times that of the female’s. However, all this apparently generous river of semen contains is male genetic material and a cheap, stripped-down, single-purpose, super-efficient delivery mechanism for it. The egg meanwhile is a complex, high-cost, superbly-equipped creation, containing a mass of material ready to be employed in the difficult task of sustaining embryonic development. These two divergent reproductive strategies place male cells (small, cheap, numerous) and female (large, costly, few) at opposite ends of a quantifiable spectrum, and it is to this divergence the biologist turns for explanations of significant parts of human nature and behaviour.

The female holds all the material that will sustain reproduction. The male merely has some material to be reproduced. Fortunately for him, the female has some use for it, for only through the admixture of his reproductive material can the female’s reproductive factory produce something other than a clone. So the female must consent to having male seed sown in her while at the same time doing what she can to avoid becoming merely the soil for his seed. Having allowed the outsider in, she must control and limit him. Reproduction is therefore a competition, or, to use one of Jones’s metaphors, *war* (an “active, bitter and ancient battle of the sexes”):

Males are, in many ways, parasites upon their partners. Their interests are to persuade the other party to invest in reproduction, while doing as little as they can themselves... [T]he two parties enter a biological dance. Each has its own agenda, and, as one gains, the other fights back.

Throughout the book Jones refers back to this central point, to use it to illuminate some fact or behaviour, or to point out something as a puzzle. This struggle between sperm and egg explains for example why there are two (and not several) sexes. That is, small, mobile cells will have the best prospects of fusing with large healthy ones with promising futures. The smaller and more stripped-down one type, the bigger and better-equipped the other must be, which means the small ones have even more scope for becoming smaller still. Their dance takes them in opposite directions; in between their extremes there are no viable strategies.

One must wonder about the *colour* of Jones’s illuminations. This is a discussion of mere single cells, but they appear to have strategies and agendas, to dance, persuade, struggle, allow (“reluctantly”) and so on. Elsewhere genes are passengers and hijackers, migrants, refugees and settlers, the Y chromosome

is an insular republic, has an economy and “like most closed societies it becomes both selfish and wasteful” (18), the genome as a whole is a *polis* plagued by scroungers, hangers-on, foreigners and degenerates. “Each child is a gamble in DNA futures.” (36) Individuals in the reproductive economy are “expert investment analysts” (39). *Y*'s tumult of empires and conquerors, republics and usurpers, wealth and ruin could have come from the pages of *Penguin Island*. The same dark relish is present in both. But what is the work of all these metaphors? What is a biology in thrall to the conceptual framework of a sociology obsessed with a biology that expresses itself in the language of the social sciences? Jones does not comment, and it is not at all clear that the issue strikes him. Biologists have had an uneasy relationship with metaphor throughout the history of their subject. Some have struggled to keep it at a distance, and others have sought to tame it. Occasionally metaphor overwhelms its author, like Frankenstein's monster, and destroys the arguments which brought it into being. But Jones has a defter control of his creations than, say, the unfortunate Dawkins, and while one may have some doubts about what all those metaphors are doing in there they are not substitutes for argument, nor do they obscure more than they illuminate.

At any rate, despite his not obviously being aware of the role such metaphors play, they do not stand between him and the social realities they point towards. Some of these connections between the worlds of genes and chromosomes and those of persons and societies are more amusing to read of than others. His grimmest pages deal with some of the abuse and violence inflicted upon those who respectively possess and don't possess the *Y* chromosome. Eleven pages on circumcision make some uncomfortable and sometimes alarming reading. Those which follow, on the subject of castration, are still more shocking. His analysis of the sex-selection (that is, abortion and infanticide) which accompanies the

dowry systems of large parts of the developing world is no less chilling. Other sections, which detail for example the lot of those whose internal sexual chemistry means their bodies fail to meet the expectations of a world which has room only for two well-defined sexes, are painfully poignant. Jones eschews the bland, supposedly 'scientific' tones sometimes adopted by social anthropologists and biologists who too earnestly take the example of the physical sciences as their model. Genetic facts have issue in social value, but Jones is a critic as well as a reporter, and makes scientific and political analysis work both ways, to apply not only to social practice, but scientific theorising also.

Happier chapters abound with a rich population of facts and analyses. “Hydraulics for boys” discusses the workings of the male genital organ (“Love starts with chemistry but it ends in physics”), and also of the industry that has attended to it since pre-Biblical times. Needless to say, a vast part of that industry has been charlatanry, as it continues to be. Once again, Jones's gaze extends beyond the immediate matter in hand. Viagra has saved many a man, but it is also playing a part in saving the numerous endangered species whose organs have had a long history of being employed in potions and pills. The market price of animal penises has plummeted as men turn in their millions to a new generation of drugs which actually work. “Bend Sinister”, on the relationship between paternity and fathering, probably represents Jones at his happiest, as Freud, Engels, the United Kingdom's Child Support Agency, blood groups, Charlie Chaplin, single nucleotide polymorphisms, Thomas Jefferson and the Indian caste system succeed each other easily to build up a picture of the issue in which no one mode of truth-telling - evolutionary, biological, social, historical, political - prevails over the others. Instead they are obliged to reflect upon one another; so, for example:

Now that DNA has made the truth about paternity so easy to discover, the nature

of legitimacy - and of fatherhood - needs to change. Some native peoples of South America are in advance of the developed world. Among the Bari of Venezuela, a woman may copulate with several partners, each of whom sees himself as in part the father - and such people live up to their obligations, as a child with several 'parents' has twice the chance of survival than does an infant with just one. In the cities of Brazil, too, a man often provides powdered milk ('father's milk', as the locals call it) which confers legitimacy on a child born to his partner by another. (169)

Jones's insistence on working together science and culture finds its highest point in an eye-opening chapter on names, patriline and languages. Across cultures and epochs men's names can be traced back through a history in which those of women are simply lost: surnames generally point at fathers, not mothers. But strangely, this cultural sex-bias is matched by a biological one. Our genes are a jumbled collection, handed down from a past in which sexual reproduction has been mixing them up since it began. But the chromosome which belongs to men only does not suffer this indignity, as the female of the species has nothing to mix it up with. So a man passes on his Y chromosome, free from any female admixture, to his son:

The Y is an arrow of manhood that flies from Adam to every male alive today. As mutations [*i.e.* the only mechanism of genetic change at work in the Y] build up on its passage through history, each lineage gains an identity of its own. [...S]ex muddies the waters of descent. Safe from its influence, male chromosomes are a direct link to ancient times. To map them across the globe is to relive man's history. (173)

Because of the way surnames work, genealogy uncovers and traces a history of men and their wanderings and fortunes. The way genes work means that DNA studies into our past do much the same. Women simply disappear in this resolutely masculine history of names and genes.

No text of this scope could escape without a few false steps or omissions. Jones notes that biology has only relatively recently begun to take proper account of the female's active role in sexual selection. Since Aristotle, the association of maleness and masculinity with activity, and femaleness and femininity with passivity, has permeated thinking across the disciplines. This association is weakening: competition between males for females indicates not so much their vigour but the lengths they are obliged to go in order to meet female demands. Males are not fighting *for* the females, but fighting to be *chosen* by them. It also turns out that the female's active role in partner-choosing continues after insemination; sperm face a series of obstacles designed to filter out less perfect and desirable specimens, while in some species a female can control the sperm of many different males to allow only the best to fertilise her eggs. A writer alert to patterns of discovery in science should not fail to enquire into what lies behind such a shift. In this case the plausible candidates include changing attitudes towards human sexuality, greater numbers of women in scientific research, and the feminism which has influenced both. What other revelations in biology might such influences have in store? This is not a question that seems to occur to him. Elsewhere, he repeats the claim that part of the developing world's excess of boys is a result of the tendency of parents to have children until they have a son, whereas of course the sex ratio at birth is the sex ratio at birth, and no amount of post-natal decision-making can alter it. Finally, despite his earlier warnings, his own discussion of sex and gender does not wholly avoid stumbling in the confusions the distinction offers. These are quibbles, however, and do not spoil the fabric of the book.

Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Jones’s response is a picture of humanity in which men not only are born and become, but also unmade and unravelled, by genetics, chemistry, economics, history, culture and ideology. This is a generous and humane

book, and, unlike most of those which claim to, makes a genuine contribution to the understanding of man’s predicament.

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