

Nature, nurture, and politics

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Political imputations in science are notoriously a tricky business. I addressed this issue in the context of the nature–nurture debate in the penultimate chapter of my book *Making Sense of Heritability* (Cambridge U. P. 2005). Although the book mainly dealt with the logic of how one should think about heritability of psychological differences, it also discussed the role of politics in our efforts to understand the dynamics of that controversy. I first argued that if a scholar publicly defends a certain view (say, hereditarianism) in the debate about IQ, race and genetics this fact alone cannot justify attributing a political motivation to that person. But then later I suggested that the pressure of political correctness could explain some peculiarities of the contemporary controversy about the heritability of group differences in IQ. Several reviewers of my book raised a tu quoque objection. Am I not doing here the same thing that I condemn others for?

I will try to show that this is not the case. Furthermore, it seems to me that this whole issue is of some general interest and that it far transcends the level of those typical and often not very consequential author-reviewer disagreements. I am grateful to the editor of this journal for giving me an opportunity to publish this short note with additional clarifications.

Under what conditions is it legitimate to suspect that a scientific controversy has been influenced by political motives of its participants? Here is, in very general terms, a possible list of five conditions which (if jointly satisfied) would signal the corruption of science by politics:

1. In a discussion over scientific hypothesis H, a political implication that is generally associated with the potential truth of H is considered politically unwelcome by the overwhelming majority of researchers.

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2. Some arguments against H have been put forward by a group of scholars (let's call them M-scholars), who themselves openly and repeatedly admit that their opposition to H springs from their political views.
3. Many independent and highly respected scientists who have not publicly taken part in the debate over H also state that M-scholars cannot keep their science and politics apart.
4. In the theoretical field P, the arguments of M-scholars against H have been accepted for decades without any critical examination and have been enthusiastically advertised as completely undermining H.
5. The arguments of M-scholars against H are actually very bad arguments, suffering from many easily recognizable logical fallacies, distortions of H and straw man criticisms.

Under these five conditions, I submit, a conjecture that the almost universal rejection of H in field P has something to do with politics is much more than a wild guess or an arbitrary political imputation. Notice that by taking this conjecture as our working hypothesis we avoid the treacherous area of individual psychology and personal political accusations, and yet we manage, by connecting several independent facts, to make some sense of an otherwise mysterious mass conversion to the denial of H that defies any purely "internalist" explanation.

In the nature–nurture debate, or more specifically in the controversy about the explanation of group differences in intelligence, it is easy to translate our abbreviations: H = hereditarianism (the claim that genetic differences account, at least partly, for the existing group differences in IQ). P = philosophy of science. M-scholars = Marxist or Marxisant scientists (primarily Lewontin but also Gould, Kamin, Rose...).

Are the five aforementioned conditions satisfied in this particular debate? Let us conduct a quick, telegraphic overview.

1. Yes, almost all scientists (including many of those who defend H) say that they would wish that H is false because they believe that the truth of H would make it much harder to solve current political problems of racial inequality.
2. Yes, Lewontin and other advocates of the "not in our genes" approach used to stress—and with some pride, for that matter—that their opposition to hereditarianism was indeed politically motivated. This sometimes went so far that they even claimed that their "critical science" was an "integral part" of their struggle to create "a more socially just—socialist—society" (preface to *Not in Our Genes*).
3. Yes, some of the highly esteemed figures in contemporary biology, who never publicly entered the fray of the race and IQ debate, treat Lewontin's politicization of science as a matter of common knowledge. For example, in a letter to Peter Medawar in 1977, Francis Crick says: "Lewontin, in particular, is known to be strongly politically biased and himself admits to being scientifically unscrupulous on these issues. That is, he takes them as political ones and therefore feels justified in the use of biased arguments." In *The Ancestor's Tale* Richard Dawkins describes Lewontin as a "distinguished geneticist, known for the strength of his political convictions and his weakness

- for dragging them into science at every opportunity.” Similarly, in a letter to Cambridge geneticist A. W. F. Edwards in 2003, Ernst Mayr has used some harsh words when commenting on Lewontin’s penchant for mixing science and politics.
4. Yes, in philosophy of science (as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also reports) the consensus about heritability was established in the 1970s. Lewontin’s criticisms of the concept were regarded as the final word on the matter. Case closed. It is especially in this context that Michael Ruse’s statement that Lewontin “became a kind of guru to the philosophy of biology community” seems entirely justified. A good illustration of Lewontin’s cult status in philosophy of science is a recent review of his book *The Triple Helix*, written by a senior, established philosopher of biology and published in a leading journal in the field. The reviewer first compares Lewontin to the rock star Elvis Costello in “remaining effectively hip through the ages” and then concludes: “This book should be on every philosophy of biology reading list, if not on every course syllabus... it represents the perfect mix of philosophy and science... This is what every philosopher of biology should strive for. To return to the Elvis Costello analogy, Lewontin’s *The Triple Helix* is (I can’t resist) ‘So Like Candy’.”
 5. Yes, in my book on heritability I tried to demonstrate the deplorable quality of Lewontin’s methodological objections that produced the anti-hereditarian consensus among philosophers of science. Obviously I am not in a position to judge how successful I was in that enterprise but it may be indicative that none of my central arguments have been challenged so far.

Of course, many uncertainties still remain. There was clearly no space in this short text to defend properly any of the above five claims. I merely gestured at their truth, fully aware that I am thereby only scratching the surface of an extremely complicated and contentious topic (Most of these claims, however, were defended in more detail in my book on heritability).

Someone might complain here that, symmetrically, a similar and equally convincing argument could be made to prove the opposite political bias. That is, if the five-step syllogism was used to demonstrate the impact of left-wing politics (Marxism or egalitarianism) on those who *oppose* hereditarianism, is it not then possible to develop a structurally similar five-step argument to show the impact of right-wing politics (racism or conservatism) on those who *defend* hereditarianism? Yes, this is possible in principle but in my opinion some of the premises in that mirror argument would be clearly false, at least about the contemporary nature–nurture debate. For instance, it is *not* true that (1) a political implication that is generally associated with the potential truth of *environmentalism* is considered politically unwelcome by the overwhelming majority of researchers. Also, it is simply false that (2) some arguments *in support of H* have been put forward by a group of scholars (let’s call them *R-scholars*), who themselves openly and repeatedly admit that their *defense* of H springs from their political views. And so on.

Therefore the symmetry breaks down. An initially plausible case can actually be made only for one side.

In conclusion, if (as I have suggested) the five conditions indeed apply to the current opposition to hereditarianism, the account of that scientific debate that omits politics altogether will be seriously incomplete. It may seem to some people that focusing just on the arguments and avoiding political imputations should always be praised as “taking the high road”, but in fact this approach will sometimes make important aspects of a scientific controversy completely unintelligible. Trying to understand the dynamics of contemporary discussions about heritability, race and IQ without mentioning politics is very much like attempting to understand the debate about Intelligent Design by focusing only on biological complexity, fine details of the bacterial flagellum and intricacies of probability reasoning, but completely ignoring the religious context.

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