

Reuniting the Unity that Never Was

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A review of: *Reuniting America: Saving the Market System (from itself)*. By Kalman Glantz and Gary Bernhard 2012. ASIN: B008A6P22C

Reuniting America: Saving the Market System (from itself), by Kalman Glantz and J. Gary Bernhard, was *intended* to be a short, graphic non-novel. Unfortunately for the authors, they were unable to locate an illustrator for the task. This left the book as simply a short dialog between several fictional actors who represent various social groups, such as liberals, conservatives, government and non-government forces, as well as an old man who is supposed to represent Darwin. The purpose of this dialog would seem to be an attempt at developing and altering public policy that “fits” better with evolved human psychology, so to speak. These policy suggestions tackle contentious topics such as campaign finance reform, the right to discriminate, tax policy, and laws regulating advertising – what some would consider free speech.

While such a goal might seem interesting on a superficial level, it would seem to overlook a rather important and complicating factor: though humans share a suite of similar, underlying psychological mechanisms, the output of those mechanisms with regard to contentious topics (like sex or censorship) are unlikely to reach universal agreement. This is due to the simple fact that neither the proximate nor ultimate interests of each individual entirely overlap with one another. For instance, many resources – be they in the form of food, energy expenditure, reproduction, or other social or material goods – are unable to be consumed by more than one party at any one time. The time that a friend spends with another party is investment that friend is not spending on you; a relationship between you and your partner involves the monopolization of both of your romantic intentions (to the extent that such a relationship does not involve infidelity, anyway).

While I do not feel comfortable speaking to the moral or practical aspects of the specific political goals outlined in the book, there are a number of things I feel compelled to say about the misunderstanding of evolutionary theory throughout the dialog, as well as some problematic assumptions the authors make about human evolutionary history.

Taking those two issues in order, it is clear that Glantz and Bernhard are at least familiar with certain concepts frequently referenced in the evolutionary literature such as reciprocity and arms races. They note that people tend to dislike

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inequality, unfair outcomes, and being lied to, enjoy the benefits of high status, and live within a social web of reciprocal relationships. Further, Glantz and Bernhard also note that powerful emotions tend to accompany these likes and dislikes. While there is nothing particularly controversial about much of that list, their analysis of those feelings in this dialog never breaks anything beyond a surface level. Most of Glantz and Bernhard's analysis of these facts seems comfortable to rest upon noting that they (a) exist and (b) are evolved features of our psychology. They do not mention, for instance, that most everyone seems to behave unfairly at least sometimes when they can get away with it (Pillutla & Murnighan, 2003). Further, they do not address some implications of the fact that people seem to behave unfairly *when they think they can get away with it*, such as the notion that opportunities to behave in such a manner needed to be a recurrent feature of our environment in order for cognitive systems that take advantage of them to evolve (but more on that later). Accordingly, a reader who is already familiar with the concepts in this book will be unlikely to gain any new insights from their presentation of evolutionary theory. Readers who are not familiar with those concepts, however, will be similarly unlikely to gain any new insights from the shallow presentation.

This is not just a simple matter of shallow treatments, though; readers who are unfamiliar with the concepts touched upon in this dialog are likely to come away with a misleading or false impression of several important things. On a semantic level, for instance, the language used in mentioning the fact that our psychology evolved tends uncomfortably towards genetic determinism. Some examples of this would be phrases like, "almost certainly encoded in our genes," "deeply embedded in our genes," and "[these feelings] come from deep in your genes." While it is true enough that genetics do play a vital role in determining the design of our psychology, phrases like those are clumsy and could easily be mistaken for suggesting that genetics are *the* factor which determines the eventual shape of our psychology, rather than being one set of factors that interact with non-genetic factors to codetermine the eventual outcome (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992).

In addition to the semantic level, there are deeper concerns for the accuracy of the information presented regarding human evolutionary history. For instance, at one point the authors suggest that in pre-agricultural societies people apparently could not get away with lying, as everyone knew everyone else. On top of the connection between the two at the abstract level being tenuous at best (that is, it is unclear what knowing someone has to do with their ability to successfully lie to you or others), lying is also a human universal (Brown, 1991). In light of the fact that Glantz and Bernhard similarly suggest that all humans have a lie-detection systems, this would seem to lead to a contradiction. Being lied to *must have been* a persistent adaptive problem that had to be solved; without lying there would be no need to detect lies, and, accordingly, no cognitive system would have developed to solve that problem. Of course, since such a cognitive system exists, this implies that people must have been able to get away with lying over the course of human evolutionary history, regardless of who knew who.

As this dialog contains no references, it is not possible to know what the authors are basing their assertion about lying not being possible in early human societies on. However, there is another passage in the dialog which might offer a possible answer. While it is not controversial that human psychology contains many

cognitive systems that are not always pulling in the same direction – that is, there are mutually exclusive goals that cannot all be satisfied, and different cognitive modules are not all trying to satisfy the same one (Kurzban, 2010) – Glantz and Bernhard assert that during early human history these cognitive systems were all “in balance”; a balance that was shattered by the advent of agriculture. It is worth pointing out that, on a conceptual level, I have absolutely no idea what “balance” is supposed to even mean. On its own, the idea of a “balance” is a vacuous one. One could venture a guess as to its meaning using context, however. Given the context of the book, it might mean something along the lines of maximal happiness or cooperation within early human societies (societies where people did not lie, did “good work,” and were all deeply invested in one another’s welfare). Indeed, Glantz and Bernhard suggest that each political party (Democrats and Republicans) holds “half the truth”, with one party promoting “freedom and self-reliance” (presumably the Republicans), while the other promotes “solidarity and mutual aid” (presumably the Democrats). The authors seek to *reunite* these two groups, implying that political divisions used to not really exist (presumably when things were “in balance”).

Such a coarse dichotomy would appear to betray a deep misunderstanding of human psychology. Much like their point about lying not being possible in early human history, this point about the nature of the political divide seems to be profoundly incorrect. As an illustrative example, consider the issue of the freedom to use drugs. If Glantz and Bernhard were correct, we ought to expect that Republicans would be the party actively supporting a freedom to use drugs (as they like “freedom”), and resistance to drug legalization should come predominantly from Democrats (the ones who do not have that freedom half of the truth). As recent Gallup polls have indicated, though, that this is not the case: the majority of Republicans oppose legalization and the majority of Democrats support it (Saad, 2009). In light of that, one might begin to question this highly simplistic model. In fact, some recent research has found that once sociosexual attitudes are controlled for, political ideology ceases to predict attitudes towards drugs, though sociosexual attitudes still remain a significant predictor of attitudes towards drugs even after controlling for political and religious views (Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, 2010).

While this dialog may have aspirations towards using evolutionary theory to reunite political parties and build a public policy agreeable to everyone, it is not at all clear from this presentation that the authors demonstrate a firm grasp of either matter: the use of evolutionary theory serves only as a thin veneer, never approaching much in the way of substance, and the entire premise of *reuniting* would imply there was, at least initially, a unity of views, be they moral, political, economic, or anything else. The latter is a claim for which the authors never provide evidence. If there was never a unity to begin with – due to the fact that individuals have competing best interests in the zero-sum game that is evolution – there is nothing to reunite, nor is it particularly likely that widespread agreement will ever be reached. While one might be tempted to overlook these issues in light of the fact that the book clearly was not written for an academic audience, it is entirely unclear what audience *would* benefit from this presentation.

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