

The First Sex: The Natural Talents of Women and How They Are Changing the World; The Decline of Males



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Population and Development Review, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Dec., 1999), 791-793.

Stable URL:

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Population and Development Review is currently published by Population Council.

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A brief review of *Children of Prometheus* can hardly do justice to Wills's richly textured argument. He effectively pulls together materials from a variety of specialized fields, including archaeology, cultural and physical anthropology, epidemiology, medicine, neurobiology, primatology, social psychology, and sociology. That he tells this complexly woven story with a graceful style and an occasional dose of keen wit only adds to the reader's enjoyment and enlightenment. It is, in short, a volume from which social scientists with varying interests will be able to learn much. Wills's argument illustrates the manner in which evolutionary theory may usefully inform analyses of, for example, migration, ethnic intermarriage, fertility behavior, and patterns of morbidity and mortality. Above all, it stresses the potent selective pressures emanating from the cultural environment that continue to shape the evolutionary pathway of our species and, in the process, reminds us that the same selective forces that forged our traits in the distant past are still actively constraining our species' destiny.

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TIMOTHY CRIPPEN

HELEN FISHER

The First Sex: The Natural Talents of Women and How They Are Changing the World
New York: Random House, 1999. xx + 378 p. \$25.95.

LIONEL TIGER

The Decline of Males
New York: Golden Books, 1999. 323 p. \$23.00.

These two anthropologists have the same two goals: to present a case for evolutionary psychology and to sell books. Both incorporate demographic factors into their analyses, making their efforts of potential interest to students of population. Fisher focuses on women's increased participation in the labor force, a global trend she believes to be biologically driven. Evolutionary forces have molded women into "web thinkers," who see the broad picture, consider all options, are sensitive to others, accept ambiguity, and easily modify objectives when necessary. Women, in short, are ideal members of the twenty-first-century corporate work team. Occasionally Fisher's propensity to see biological advantage borders on the silly—such as when contending that women's greater ability to see in dim light makes them more adept viewers of slide presentations—but most of her exposition follows stereotypes: women will come to predominate in the health professions because their greater natural empathy makes them better healers and because their greater dexterity makes them better surgeons. Her one foray into demographic analysis is to provide a sociobiological slant on the aging of the baby boom generation: women will burst through the glass ceiling in their corporate careers as their female hormones decline with menopause, unmasking the power of their testosterone. Demographers will find her analysis of which societies will experience this shift vague and occasionally misleading, and readers who like their stories

well plotted will find her testosterone explanation of employment success somewhat at odds with her thesis about the new workplace's affinity for female traits. She does, however, manage to have something new to say about the baby boom.

Tiger contributes to this "production" debate, but from the other side of the podium. He bemoans the fate of the prey-stalking, physically assertive male programmed to focus single-mindedly on demanding tasks. When young, the contemporary male finds himself in schools that unnaturally expect him to sit still for hours a day, for years on end, and when he rebels he gets filled with tranquilizers and is said to suffer from "attention deficit disorder." Once discharged from school he enters a workplace with few occupations, outside of the military and sports, suited to his inclinations. But no matter how great are the male's contemporary workplace problems, Tiger argues that his decline has even more to do with estrangement from the reproductive realm. The arrival of female-controlled contraception, specifically the midcentury development of "the Pill," marked the true downfall of the male. In a world with the Pill a female can have sex when, and with whom, she wants. If she desires a child, her improved work status frees her from the need for male support. The Pill infects the male, biologically driven to assure a place for his genes in the next generation, with a terminal case of "paternity uncertainty." He reacts by walking away from his now questionable fatherhood, and societies everywhere experience sharp upsurges in divorce and single motherhood. Tiger foresees a twenty-first-century world in which the male has become so much the "second sex" that there might be no need for him.

What do these analyses offer the student of population? Both provide entertaining introductions to the thinking of evolutionary psychologists. Since they incorporate familiar demographic themes in their analyses, one might hope that demographers reading them would be induced to broaden their explanatory horizons. I fear, however, that the authors' deductive methods and unsophisticated social trend analyses (most of which are lifted from newspaper accounts) will elicit more dismissal than marvel from this readership. Tiger, for example, never offers any empirical evidence, other than a rough reference to timing, to support his theory that the arrival of the Pill caused societal increases in divorce and single motherhood—not even a cursory discussion of Pill use rates, divorce rates, and rates of single motherhood in various societies. He deduces the societal significance of female-controlled contraception from a consideration of general sociobiological premises, but attempts no empirical proof. This, however, might be a good thing because in Tiger's demographic analyses what is most memorable are his gaffes: his discussions of "zero birth rates" and his embarrassing explanation of how sex-selective abortion of female fetuses in India somehow produces "an excess of potential brides over potential grooms" that facilitates the growing problem of dowry deaths (p. 139).

There is increasing scientific evidence that evolutionary processes have produced sexes with distinct physiological and psychological traits, traits that might be especially relevant to any student of human behavior wishing to better understand patterns of work, marriage, and reproduction. These two books, however, provide a cautionary tale to those who would use trends of a comparatively brief duration to illustrate the utility of what, by its very nature, is a perspective on human behavior suited to explaining trends encompassing, at the least, many generations. No doubt it is tempting in an era when the war between the sexes makes

headline news, and the public is troubled by having half its marriages fail and by having many of its daughters bring forth babies without husbands, to offer a “deep” explanation of the factors behind these events. But as demographers are acutely aware, having themselves not foreseen the baby boom, social trends can be very fickle things. Although just published, Tiger’s talk of high unemployment among American males already sounds “odd” today. And having characterized the single young mother as a “Mother Courage” who is “at the heart of the ancient mammalian process” (p. 174), one wonders what he would make of the sharp decline in birth rates of single teens in the United States during the 1990s.

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FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order

New York: The Free Press, 1999. xii + 354 p. \$26.00.

Big-picture social science aims to lend order to social facts, finding or refinding patterns in them and telling stories about them. The facts need to be important, the stories interesting. Francis Fukuyama is an accomplished practitioner in this domain. *The Great Disruption*, like his earlier books, is directed at a wide audience. It should be of more than passing interest to social demographers.

The plot line is simple. A great disruption in Western society has occurred; the author characterizes it. There are competing explanations for it, each of which the author finds unsatisfactory; he proposes his own. The disruption needs to be healed: history suggests that this healing may be largely a spontaneous process, but it is also likely to require deliberate efforts at social innovation; the author makes a few general suggestions about what might be done.

In the middle of this argument the author takes the opportunity to introduce some contemporary ideas in social science: kernels of theory and gobs of evidence that might be drawn on in understanding what is going on and predicting how matters might develop. These are popularizations rather than original contributions, but are well done and sustain interest in themselves. However, they are not in fact much drawn on. Indeed, the single chapter on “what comes next” is quite perfunctory. The reader, it might be said, has been shown the facts, given some tools, and now should go away and use them to fashion the remedy—or simply to be better informed in watching the repair take place unaided.

So much for the skeleton; now for the flesh. The disruption of the title refers to a set of changes in Western societies observed starting in the 1960s: “increasing levels of crime and social disorder, the decline of families and kinship as a source of social cohesion, and decreasing levels of trust” (p. 60). The demographic component of the disruption is seen in falling marriage rates, falling fertility rates and at the same time many more extramarital births, and sharply higher divorce rates. Fukuyama sees all these as manifestations of a decline in social capital.

Social capital, roughly speaking, is the resources that inhere in social relations. The concept was examined thoroughly in a recent issue of this journal by Nan