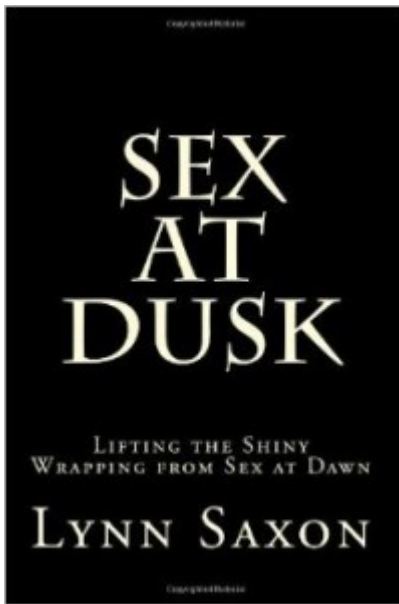


Promiscuity: Science or Ideology?



I came across an article this past week which reinforced how science is often utilized as an ideological tool. And I realized that I am sometimes tempted to do the same thing. This isn't really news I suppose. We are all aware of how pharmaceuticals pay for research to support a drug's effectiveness. If that research shows that the drug is contraindicated, it is all too common for non-supportive research to get buried. Or more simply, when I was searching around

for the long-term effects of caffeine, I was pleased to discover that there was a plethora of research that supported my addiction. Until I discovered that the majority of these studies were supported by the coffee and tea industry.

As well, we know that the historically recent attempt by fundamentalist Christians to use science to support biblical literalism comes from the same motivation.

But the revelation this week was in relation to a best-selling book *Sex at Dawn* (Ryan and Jeta, 2010). It was recommended to me by a colleague as a must-read. So I ploughed through it as best I could. The thesis is that men and women are naturally promiscuous, much like bonobo chimps, but the dawn of agricultural civilization which included belief in private ownership (of women as well) and misguided Christian teaching has caused us to live with a moral overlay that is unnatural. In pre-agricultural hunter/gatherer cultures, women were free to have sex with whomever they wished, and could assume that paternal obligations would be shared by all the men. Men, by extension, were free to let their natural animal instinct to

have sex with as many women as possible. Research studies were cited. It was all very convincing. It explained everything about why men have so many affairs and women are all so sexually oppressed.

Then I read a critique of the book, cleverly titled, *Sex at Dusk: Lifting the Shiny Wrapping from Sex at Dawn*, by Lynn Saxon. The author is an evolutionary psychologist who reports that *Sex at Dawn* was virtually ignored by the scientific community, even while enjoying incredible popularity with the public. But she was so outraged by how the authors interpreted the same scientific data that she was reading, she felt she had to write the book as a rebuttal. Her arguments involve technical points about evolutionary psychology. But many boil down to how humans were actually able to increase their survival rate precisely through pairing, which facilitated paternal responsibility for offspring—something the bonobo males don't have. They also point out that there is plenty of research which supports the evidence that this pair-bonding/marriage was indeed happening in a great many hunter/gatherer cultures. How then do you explain monogamy as an unnatural occurrence explained by the advent of ownership in agricultural civilization?

Then Lynn Saxon ends by asking if these authors can read and effectively ignore the findings of the same studies she was reading what is their agenda? Unsurprisingly, it's ideological.

“In this analysis, *Sex at Dawn* has been caught with its ideological pants down. ?[R]ather than a plausible potential explanation of our evolution, [*Dawn*]...reveals itself as a contemporary middle-class, child-free, sex-obsessed, male fantasy projected back onto prehistory (p. 209). ?The shiny, superficially egalitarian wrapping of ?shared sex'...makes it no less of a male fantasy (p. 201).

I then listened to a [debate](#) between author, Robert Wright and

Christopher Ryan (author of *Sex at Dawn*). Ryan had been critical of Wright's popular book *The Moral Animal*. Both write from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, but come to dramatically different conclusions. I won't go into their respective arguments, but it was interesting listening to these two neo-Darwinists. What struck me was their shared assumption of historical determination. In other words, the best interpretation of the earliest behaviour of animals and humans would lead us to the truth about contemporary humans—as though the evolutionary process had stopped 200,000 years ago or more. Why wouldn't we assume that moral intelligence has continued to evolve (as it certainly has), and just because bonobo males and females are promiscuous, and even if there is evidence of early human promiscuity, that monogamy as an ideal is a more evolved expression of what it means to be human.

By more evolved I simply mean that it is in the context of a deeply committed intention to fidelity, both emotional and



sexual, that love has the best chance of realizing itself. I have personally failed in this intention. But I still believe (this isn't science) that long-term monogamous intimacy, challenging though it is, creates the optimum conditions for the evolution of love. The failure is mine, in other words, and not the result of me acting against natural, promiscuous

instincts. Think I'll write a book about it.