

**Roger N. Lancaster: *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003**

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1 U.S. anthropologist and "unreconstructed socialist" Roger N. Lancaster has produced a wide-ranging and entertaining book which seeks "to critique the naturalization of heterosexuality in recent science and [seeks] an understanding of how bioreductivist ideas relate to ongoing changes in sexual culture" (308). Over some 350 pages of text, Lancaster shows how, in the wake of movements such as gay liberation and feminism, which have problematized "the quest for an authentic self" (7), US-American culture is "awash with highly-publicized (and publicity-sensitive) studies asserting a genetic source, a hormonal cause, and/or a hardwired, gendered brain as the basis for all manner of human traits and practices" (8).

2 Lancaster relies heavily on previous scholarship in synthesizing a compelling critique of the claims of "[s]ociobiology and its offshoot evolutionary psychology, which explains our attitudes and behaviors in terms of natural selection" (11). Scientific attempts to find a biological basis for (usually male) homosexuality (such as the wildly over-hyped quest for a "gay gene") and the search for "proof" of the naturalness of human gender relations by reference to the animal kingdom are also roundly critiqued. Lancaster demonstrates, by providing a plethora of counter-examples, that the scientific case for a "natural" gender hierarchy based on the US-style post-war nuclear family depends on selective citation of zoological examples and a good deal of "projection, ideology and outright fantasy" (59). Lancaster dubs such attempts by scientists to shore up a preexisting social order "biological folklore, fables contrived out of prejudice, and related forms of pretend knowledge" (15).

3 Lancaster's analysis of "bioreductivism" extends beyond the science itself to its reception and representation in sources from media and popular culture such as advertising, reality television, sitcom television and reporting on scientific matters in publications such as Time and Newsweek. Situating his critique in the realm of cultural studies and queer theory, Lancaster nonetheless draws extensively on his primary discipline of anthropology (whose practitioners, he admits sheepishly, are the "heroes and heroines" [64] of his book) to refute also any normalizing claims based on hunter-gatherer societies:

The basic facts about hunters and gatherers remain open to question. One could mobilize contradictory evidence from widely differing foraging societies to show that a sexual division of labor is or isn't practiced, that life-long monogamous pair bonding

is or isn't practiced, that men or women are or aren't equal, that homosexuality is or isn't condoned. The only thing we cannot reasonably conclude is that any of this has anything to do with the time of human origins, with humanity in the raw, with the basic human blueprint. (67)

4 Lancaster links Darwin's "logical inconsistencies" (87) and Eurocentric heterosexism to the "maximalist logic" of modern geneticists and sociobiologists, who make all manner of absurd claims on behalf of genes. What troubles Lancaster most is the social conservatism underlying this "biomythology," which proceeds on the assumption that:

We are selfish because of our genes. We are selfish because of "the cold, calculated process of evolution," which everywhere inculcates and rewards selfishness. It is therefore not only futile but most likely counterproductive to try to change social inequities. They serve a purpose, and they are hardwired into our deepest human nature. (95)

5 Lancaster's book will provide satisfying reading for those who have long been infuriated by the uncritical reception of the "findings" (opinions?) of sociobiologists, which seem to "prove" what western societies claim to have "known" all along about gender roles and sexuality. Feminist readers will be pleased to find much important feminist work acknowledged and invoked here. However, the book is characterized in this reviewer's opinion by some lost opportunities and, perhaps, some "logical inconsistencies" of Lancaster's own.

6 Lancaster at one point dubs himself an "unreconstructed socialist" and criticizes the failures of the liberation approach of the 1970s gay movement, maintaining "we socialists had-have-the better theory" (312). Yet this skepticism of liberalism seems to at times abandon Lancaster's analysis-like a liberal op-ed columnist he inveighs against the "endless crusades against tobacco and alcohol" and the "antipornography crusades of the 1980s" (334), condemning the interference of a "Daddy state" (333) and lobbying for a "laissez-faire approach to personal life" (341). The socialist constructionist who is able to discern "male domination and female subordination" (310) in modern, heterosexual marriage, sees nothing but a benign "free flow of sexual representations" in the big business that is pornography. Incongruously, Lancaster suddenly musters a "you-can't-stop-progress" argument in defense of internet porn: any impediment to its rapid growth "would likely do harm to technological development at its most innovative edge" (334).

7 Also disturbing is the vitriol directed at radical feminists, whose critique of the purported naturalness of male domination and female subordination Lancaster (apparently unwittingly) shares. Drawing on Alice Echols's account of "cultural feminists," Lancaster seems unaware of the existence of a radical feminism as committed to the critique of

heterosexist, patriarchal discourses on gender as he is. Instead, he repeatedly condemns the straw woman of "cultural feminism," which, he argues, is indebted to a notion of immutable biological difference and which seeks nothing more than to invert the gender hierarchy. As Denise Thompson effectively demonstrates, "cultural feminism" is a pejorative term, a figment of the collective imagination of socialist feminists:

Behind socialist feminism's antagonism to radical/"cultural" feminism lies its continuing adherence to the Marxist materialist account of history/society [...]. It is this adherence which explains the curious oxymoron involved in the socialist feminist insistence that "cultural" feminism is "biologistic." The reasoning behind the contradiction appears to proceed as follows: "cultural" feminism is "cultural" because it is not sufficiently "materialist." And it is not "materialist" because it ignores class relations, and hence takes no account of the "real material base" of society, i.e. the forces and relations of economic production. But because, in socialist feminist eyes, all accounts of social relations must necessarily appeal to the "real (material) world," "cultural" feminism must be appealing to another kind of "materiality," i.e. "biology." But "biology" [...] is the "wrong" kind of "materiality," [so] it must be "ideological," i.e. "cultural." (Thompson 128)

8 Thompson amply demonstrates that the construct "cultural" feminism with its alleged biologism stems from misreading and antagonism on the part of the socialist feminists who coined the term. Lancaster's casting of "cultural" feminism as the evil twin of sociobiology continues this unfortunate socialist tradition of denying a radical feminism which has at its heart the rejection of bioreductivism and as its goals the eradication of hierarchical gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality, aims not at all dissimilar to Lancaster's.

9 As disappointing as the caricatures of radical feminism, though, is the missed opportunity to thoroughly critique the gender essentialism emerging from transsexual/transgender discourses. For whilst Lancaster mounts a robust challenge to inatist gay rights discourses which peddle the politically expedient, apologetic line that people are "homosexual by nature" (279), he stops short of applying this analysis to transgenderism. Offering a convincing account of the origins of the "born this way" strategies of gay rights activists in the Evangelical USA, Lancaster argues that to assert that homosexuality is a "natural" deviation is to "play a dangerous game indeed" (279). Lancaster's failure to refute the essentializing of gender in the transgender movement is even more frustrating because he seems about to do so in his introduction when he cites comments by a US female-to-male transgender activist claiming "'I knew I was a boy [...] You look at pictures of me [...] and I literally look like a little boy that's been put in a dress'" (17). Lancaster expresses sympathy with this "sense of discomfort with the ascribed gender roles" and allows that a person's "sexual identity is a deeply seated aspect of who they are" (17). The much needed critique of the reinforcement of gender roles which the above quote represents remains unchallenged

beyond a couple of gentle rhetorical questions ("Just what is a little boy or girl supposed to look like?") and transgenderism is celebrated as an oppositional practice elsewhere in the book. How claims to gender authenticity such as the above mentioned challenge "the two-sex system" whose demise Lancaster cheerfully announces (223) remains unclear.

10 This reader had the impression that-despite his ability to strongly critique the gay rights movement-Lancaster resorted to uncritically lumping together numerous groups, on the basis of their opposition to bioreductivist discourses, in a kind of rainbow alliance. "Feminists" are included in Lancaster's lists of gender warriors, but presumably he does not mean those feminists who critique the reinforcement of gender hierarchy in pornography, who are dismissed as "neo-Victorians" and "paleo-Victorian fundamentalists" (334). This is a trite dismissal of the work of anti-pornography feminists, which seeks to align them with the moral conservatism of the nineteenth century. Of course radical feminist critiques of pornography have nothing to do with morality and everything to do with a vigorous challenge to misogyny and heterosexism.

11 Whilst it is unfortunate that Lancaster does not more sincerely engage with the radical feminism he so roundly condemns as essentialist, many readers of a "constructionist" bent will enjoy his lively critique of bioreductivism and the confidence with which he demolishes both the science and the naïve reception of it.

### **Works Cited**

Thompson, Denise. *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality*. Leichhardt: Gorgon's Head Press, 1991.