

SOCIAL SCIENCES

A (Science-Based) Poor Kids' Manifesto

Samuel Bowles

James Heckman opens his compelling essay with “The accident of birth is a principal source of inequality in America today. American society is dividing into skilled and unskilled. . . . [B]irth is becoming fate.” To counter that trend, Heckman argues for a “strategy that works,” based on the following logic: “[B]oth cognitive and socio-emotional skills develop in early childhood, and their development depends on the family environment.” Growing up poor deprives children of opportunities to develop these skills, and “family environments in the United States have deteriorated.” In response, Heckman advocates early interventions such as the enriched preschool environments and home visits by professionals to assist parents that his research shows can “produce positive and lasting effects on children in disadvantaged families.”

The take-home message is that the kids of poor parents often grow up to be poor, that this fact has little to do with genetics and everything to do with the socioemotional behaviors associated with growing up poor, and that something can be done to break this cycle of poverty. If you are losing patience with overblown claims and rhetoric by policy advocates, read this book: It's not every day that you get a pro-poor manifesto written by an econometrician whose Nobel prize was awarded for advances in the quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness of public policy.

Giving Kids a Fair Chance is remarkable for the scientific advances that it represents, in good part due to Heckman and his co-authors. When Lyndon Johnson launched his War on Poverty 50 years ago, most economists would have objected to the book's first two claims: that economic success and failure run in the family and that nongenetic and noncognitive aspects of behavior are central to this process. As recently as the late 1980s, Heckman's colleague at the University of Chicago and fellow Nobel laureate Gary Becker could affirm the “land of opportunity” moniker for the United States: “Aside from families victimized by discrim-



Felix Edouard Vallotton, *The Ball* (1899).

ination . . . [a]lmost all earnings advantages and disadvantages are wiped out in three generations” (1). In his presidential address, Becker reassured the members of the American Economic Association that “low earnings as well as high earnings are not strongly transmitted from fathers to sons.” (2).

The third claim—that we can do something to help poor kids succeed—was the hope animating Johnson's War on Poverty, but it was based on no convincing evidence. Arthur Jensen began a celebrated 1969 paper “Compensatory education has been tried, and apparently it has failed” (3), and he pointed to genetic limits to raising the cognitive skills of poor kids.

But we now know that Becker's optimism was based on a statistical lapse: what appeared to be high levels of intergenerational mobility in his data resulted from a failure to take into account measurement errors that reduce the statistical association between indicators of parental and offspring economic status (4–7). Much of what looked to Becker like mobility turned out to be statistical noise. The corrected data reveal the United States as a global leader in the extent to which economic success is passed on within families (8). And although subsequent years have witnessed many failed attempts to significantly raise the cognitive performance of poor children, convincing evidence for a number of highly effective interventions (9, 10) has challenged Jensen's pessimism on this score.

Moreover, what counts as an effective intervention on behalf of the children of the poor has changed. Extending earlier work by Herbert Gintis (11), Heckman's own research has overturned the once-dominant notion that effective schooling opens the doors of economic opportunity simply by improving cognitive skills (12). Commenting on an intervention whose long-term effects he has closely studied, Heckman notes: “The Perry Preschool Program improved the lives of its participants without increasing their IQ scores, demonstrating why it is problematic to focus curricula exclusively on improving cognitive test scores” (12). There is now ample evidence that—whether by altering the noncognitive aspects of behavior stressed by Gintis and Heckman or by raising cognitive performance—improved education (for example, smaller class size) can raise the adult incomes and other measures of socioeconomic success among the children of poor parents (13, 14).

The book stands out among economic studies in its attention to noncognitive skills, “including strength of motivation, an ability to act on long-term plans, and the socioemotional regulation needed to work with others” or “character.” We know that the labor market values these traits (15), although calling character a skill is not only odd, it hides a possible difficulty (one raised in two of the commentaries that follow Heckman's essay). By a skill, we typically mean some capacity of which more is uncontroversially better; so few parents or citizens object when children are subjected to compulsory skill enhancement (schooling). But if by noncognitive skill or character Heckman means, as it seems, whatever social behavior the labor market rewards, the case is more complicated. There is some evidence, for example, that American workers and students are penalized by firms and schools (in promotions and grades, respectively) if they are seen to be “independent” and “creative” (16). Of course, parents want their child to become the kind of adult that employers seek out rather than shun. But nobody (including Heckman, I'm sure) would want the labor market's litmus test—an individual's expected contribution to an employer's profits—to become the sole adjudicator of the kinds of people our children are to become.

For the United States, Heckman makes a strong case that government should provide substitutes to fill the gaps when poor parents—too preoccupied and stressed out making ends meet or getting adequate medical

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care, or for any other reason—do not do all that is needed for their kids. But giving poor kids a fair chance requires more than plugging the parenting gaps. It requires addressing the problem of poverty itself.

By the measure of cognitive scores, the youth of a great many countries outscore their American counterparts. What is distinctive about the consistently high-scoring countries such as Finland, Belgium, and South Korea is not the amount they spend on schooling, but the fact that they are far less economically polarized than the United States. The interventions Heckman advocates, as well

as other policies to end the inheritance of poverty, are necessary but hardly sufficient. Addressing the poverty of the parents is no less urgent. As the economic dynamism of the countries just mentioned suggests, it need not come at a heavy cost.

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ANTHROPOLOGY

Evolving Beyond Stone Age Fantasies

Catherine Woods

WE all yearn for the good old days, but it is probably safe to say most of us aren't referring to the Paleolithic era. A few hardy souls, however, have adopted a paleo lifestyle in the belief that humans are evolutionarily better suited for a presumed environmental and cultural setting that our ancestors occupied between 2.3 million and 10 thousand years ago. Wearing webbed FiveFinger running shoes, eating only meat, and donating blood regularly (to mimic ancestral iron levels), these paleo devotees drastically change their lives to be more like our prehistoric ancestors. They subscribe to the belief that our physiology and culture are at an imbalance with our current climate. They are, in short, living out paleofantasies.

In *Paleofantasy: What Evolution Really Tells Us About Sex, Diet, and How We Live*, Marlene Zuk tackles the paleofantasies of exercise, diet, and family dynamics with a clever sense of humor. Using content from scientific journals to informal paleo blogs, Zuk (an evolutionary biologist at the University of Minnesota) works hard to convey a simple idea—longing for the days before tool use is not only unnecessary but silly.

Let's paint a basic picture of this fantastical Paleolithic man. He is a barefoot forager with a wife and kids. His battles come

in spurts, requiring strength to throw stones but not endurance to run long distances. His family's mobile existence prevents them from keeping animals and managing crops. And the most essential component of the fantasy: no Paleolithic man deviates from this routine.

Although Zuk dissects these behaviors, her primary arguments resonate against all aspects of the paleo lifestyle. She highlights the growing evidence that the behavior of paleo humans, whether it is diet or matrimony practices, was not uniform. The lives of our paleo ancestors differed, much in the same way that not all humans today live in high-rises or do yoga.

Paleofantasy reinforces the theme that evolution continues, even for humans. Zuk acknowledges that our ability to take down a saber-toothed tiger would require more gadgets (running shoes, contact lenses, a global positioning system) than our prehistoric ancestors might need. But how would a caveman fare in managing our modern-day stock market or finding his way out of an Ikea? Bipedalism and big brains emerged from the Paleolithic era to be used against today's challenges. Humans are most certainly still evolving, just not necessarily in ways we might expect.

Zuk also does well to remind us that evolution has no specific end goals: “[N]o organism gets to a point of perfect adaptation, heaves a sigh of genetic relief, and stops.” The biggest problem with paleofantasies is that they assume that at one

point humans were in balance with their surroundings. But evolution never stops to rest. Climate, geography, bacteria, and even humans do not exist independent of one another; as changes occur in one part of the world, evolution follows in all other parts.

While evolution may seem like a dry topic to some, Zuk keeps readers entertained by poking fun at her paleo opponents and using clever section titles such as “Cavemen in Condos.” Even for those who haven't heard of the paleo lifestyle, Zuk's book is full of entertaining tidbits such as recently evolved genetic variants that predict athleticism or give us the ability to breathe at high altitudes.

Targeting the popularized Paleolithic man is really just a strategy for Zuk's larger goal of celebrating evolution. The degree to which she emphasizes present-day adaptations over paleo counterarguments can leave the reader thirsty for more details on evolution.

At no point does Zuk make dire predictions that practicing the paleo lifestyle will lead to tragedy, illness, or death. Rather, she dispels the idea that living like our ancestors provides some kind of advantage. *Paleofantasy* is not another self-help book offering answers on how to eat, exercise, or love better in our evolving world. Instead, Zuk emphasizes that we can approach these aspects of our lives differently based on our genetic makeup.

All of Zuk's facts and anecdotes remind us that who we are goes far beyond our career or recent recollections. Instead we carry with us a set of genes molded by the lives of our ancestors—cavemen, explorers, colonists, and even hippies. We do not need to live like we are still in the past, because in essence the past has made us capable of all we can do today.

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