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NEXTBOOK FEATURE: ESSAY

07.14.05

Genius in the Making

If a scientific theory about Jews being smart is so politically incorrect, why aren't more people complaining?

ESSAY BY DAVID BERREBY

During the persecutions that marked the last millennium of European history, many Jews refused forced conversion to Christianity. Instead, they died as martyrs *al kiddush hashem*, in sanctification of the Name.

Others, of course, preferred to live. Tradition accords them no honor. It appears to be human nature to celebrate those who choose death over a convenient change of identity. But not everyone is prepared to kill or die for "my people," and we can disagree about what "my people" means and what its interests are. But no one finds the notion of dying for identity to be incomprehensible.

Why is this so? What's the source of these religious, ethnic, national, and cultural identities that inspire and terrify us all? They could reflect real differences in measurable quantities, like skin color or height. Or the boundaries between one people and another could be rooted in the mind—consequences of the way we're taught to perceive ourselves and other human beings.

Both perspectives—call them objectivist and subjectivist—have respectable histories dating back centuries. In Aristotle's time, the objectivist tradition led him to explain that Asians were flighty and Northern Europeans stupid, but the Greeks were just right because they were shaped by the temperate climate. Today, it causes some to believe there's a reason why Kenyans run faster than Inuit—and that reason explains why these two groups really are distinct. This kind of thinking gives us the rules of thumb we use to make sense of strangers in ordinary life: Because he is an X, he will do Y.

The subjectivist tradition, on the other hand, says the difference between Kenyans and Inuit is in the eye of the beholder. That doesn't mean they're imaginary or easily wished away, but it does mean these differences begin in the circumstances and mentality of the observer. After all, while Kenyans and Inuit are different in many measures, they are also, judged on other criteria, exactly alike. They are members of the same species; fathers and mothers; non-Western peoples coping with a Western-dominated world. To a subjectivist, the world doesn't naturally divide into peoples. It is divided—by observers, whose categories will change depending on their purposes.

This view led Aristotle (who was all over the map) to note that people are shaped by life with other people, in a process that never ceases to change. The

Enlightenment philosopher David Hume noted how readily people change—both on the scale of historical time (18th-century Greeks were not the same as ancient Greeks, he said) and at the scale of an individual life (as when an average man becomes an elite soldier, because he has joined a high-prestige unit and molded himself to its ways).

The subjectivist outlook has been derided as postmodernism, a label that connotes faddish and fancy academic footwork, remote from real life. Yet this view, too, is common sense. It is what tells us not to be guided by stereotypes: just because she is an X, doesn't mean she can't do Y. It lets us envisage a politics in which the future is better than the past. That's important in any democracy. In the United States, it is how, for example, Italians, once regarded as non-white, were incorporated into the American mainstream. And it is how the descendants of Jewish immigrants entered the elite institutions that once excluded their grandparents.

In practical affairs, in other words, most people use both the objectivist and subjectivist interpretations of ethnic, religious, national, and cultural categories. Like physicists who decide whether to regard light as particles or waves, depending on the experiment they're performing, most Americans deal with ethnic-cultural information in whatever mode suits the occasion.

Yet these two ways of understanding aren't really compatible, so people who have thought systematically about these questions tend to take a side. Surely, says the objectivist, if many people say, "Jews are smart," it's because Jews are measurably intelligent. Well, answers the subjectivist, people used to say Jews were particularly well-suited to play basketball. (A *Daily News* sportswriter put it this way in the 1930's: "The reason, I suspect, that basketball appeals to the Hebrew with his Oriental background is that the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart aleckness.") So let us not be too sure that today's talk has got free of today's narrow circumstances.

There are good reasons to feel ambivalent about this endless debate. The emancipation of Diaspora Jews over the past two centuries of Western history could only take place in a subjectivist context. Everyone's shared humanity is more real and certain, that view tells us, than the changeable, supposedly important differences that let us tell one ethnic group from another. In fact, Jewish thinkers contributed enough to the spread of this subjectivist view that anti-Semites from Goebbels to the Islamist [Sayyid Qutb](#) portrayed the thought of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and [Franz Boas](#) and others as a specifically Jewish attack on the Gentiles.

Then too, the idea of intrinsic Jewish traits has been a tool of anti-Semitic propaganda for centuries. Still, what would identity be without a sense of indelible peoplehood? Without the feeling that Jewishness is a fact, not a choice or circumstance, it would be hard to make sense of politics, culture, or one's own family. And that sense of factuality requires facts: Statements about what is and isn't Jewish, which don't depend on changing circumstances. Many Jews were pleased to hear about the [1997 paper](#), published in *Nature*, in which Karl Skorecki and his colleagues showed that the DNA of many *kohanim* carries a distinct marker of descent from an ancestor who lived several thousand years ago. People like to feel definite about their identity, so they welcomed news that the genetic level of analysis seemed to confirm the cultural tradition of priestly descent from Aaron. That got a lot more attention than the fact that some 30 percent of *kohanim* lack the genetic marker; and that many Iraqi Kurds possess it.

That paper exemplifies a trend that will make the objectivist-versus-subjectivist problem more urgent in the future. Not long ago, doctors and physical anthropologists could deal with the genetics of Jewish populations without touching on cultural and religious issues such as the nature of stereotypes about smart Jews or the effects of Diaspora history. Sociologists could study the history of Ashkenazic Jews in America without confronting claims about genes. This peaceful coexistence is coming to an end. Subjectivist and objectivist thinkers are increasingly converging on the same issues and problems.

A striking case in point turned up last month, when *The New York Times* and other news outlets announced the imminent publication of a [objectivist research paper](#), by Gregory Cochran, Jason Hardy, and Henry Harpending of the University of Utah, which proposed (a) that Ashkenazic Jews are said to be smart because they really are; (b) that this is so because Ashkenazim spent nearly a thousand years in Europe in a social "niche" that required brains—traders and financiers in a society that forbade them to be farmers or soldiers; (c) that certain genes found among Ashkenazim are the cause of their high intelligence; and (d) that these same genes are also responsible for a cluster of hereditary diseases, including Tay-Sachs, Gaucher's, and breast cancer, that are more common among Ashkenazim than they are in other groups.

It's a fascinating and disquieting paper, not least because it gives no easy comfort to the objectivist school. If you would like to think that Jewish smarts are a real biological fact, the paper will side with you. But only about the Ashkenazim, which might put a dent in your joy, especially if you happen to be Sephardic. The paper says Ashkenazic history created a legacy of unusual abilities (that's flattering and it's pleasant to think there's a solid explanation). But the reason it gives is the role of Jews as financiers and moneylenders (which reminds you of stereotypes that are none too pleasant to contemplate).

The *Times* piece was written by Nicholas Wade, a first-rate science writer who is, I think, sympathetic to the objectivist camp. Wade gave the paper a well-spun launch, prominently featuring a quotation from another scientist with a objectivist tilt, Steven Pinker of Harvard. "It would be hard to overstate how politically incorrect this paper is," Pinker said.

It was a savvy preemptive move—one favored by media-wise scientists of the objectivist school. By warning that the ideas to follow might offend the "politically correct," Pinker gives them the allure of forbidden truths and protects against counterarguments. After all, the implication is that if you reject this paper's arguments, you're doing a kneejerk.

In this case, however, Pinker didn't need to protect the paper from a PC assault. It got a friendly reaction from the media that covered it. It was, for several days, on the *Times*' most-emailed list. And in fact, its senior author, Harpending, told me last month that he had not received a single phone call or email of the "how-could-you?" variety.

Why? One reason is simple: Most regular people love objectivist explanations of human differences. They're so pleasantly straightforward, and they seem, somehow, to confirm your intuitions. Never mind that those same intuitions tell you that the earth is flat and that the sun revolves around us.

On top of that, science journalism, despite each article's inevitable quotation or two from someone reminding the reader that these matters are complex and

culture is involved, inevitably favors the "objectivist" school. The form of the newspaper, news website, or blog presumes that source, reporter, and reader agree upon the nature of facts and causes. But the subjectivist perspective requires that you think about points of view, and how perceptions, including perceptions of fact, are affected by history and experience.

News articles tell you that facts exist, and that these facts have causes, which consist of other facts. That's an easy fit for an idea like "Jews are smart because for centuries they worked at jobs that require brains." But it doesn't work so well for a thought like: "People we call Jews today are related to, but not the same as, people called Jews in 1300, and, by the way, IQ tests that measure intelligence in the 21st century weren't around in the 14th, so we have to think about what we mean by intelligence, and how it is measured."

So the largely favorable journalism about objectivist ideas shouldn't mislead anyone into thinking these ideas are stronger and truer.

Of course, this doesn't mean they're invalid, either. So how should to think about this paper, and the wave of largely favorable coverage it got? First, it's important to realize that the real-or-mental issue isn't going away. In fact, the debate over group differences—what are they? where do they come from? which ones matter? —is becoming ever more practical as pharmaceutical companies seek racially and ethnically specific drugs. The FDA recently approved the first one, BiDil, a medication for treating heart disease in African-Americans.

Second, neither the objectivist nor subjectivist school of thought consists of stupid people. For example, people who believe that IQ tests measure something real and consistent do not believe this means every single person of Ashkenazic descent is supersmart. Every fact about populations is a matter of probability—a claim that someone in Group A is X percent more likely to score Y than a generic human—not an all-or-nothing assertion. Conversely, subjectivists aren't emotional Stalinist morons, too afraid of facts to allow a debate. They are scientists and other intellectuals whose doubts about the notion of intrinsic, unchanging traits are well-founded. Everyone realizes now that the question is not Nature *or* Nurture, but Nature *and* Nurture. The fights are about how we tell them apart, and how they interact.

Third, and most importantly, today's attempts to link levels of analysis and cross disciplinary lines represent an opportunity, not a threat. Engaging with alien-sounding objectivist and subjectivist versions of what it means to be Jewish is a way to understand the issues better, and to tell speculation apart from anti-Semitism.

Among those who have claimed to study Jewish history from a Darwinian perspective is the psychologist Kevin MacDonald of California State University at Long Beach, who, in a trilogy of books, has interpreted Jewish tradition as an "evolutionary strategy" that gives Jews an advantage in competition for resources with Gentiles. MacDonald cites Freud and Marx (and *Star Trek!*) as examples of Jews promoting universalism to get an edge over Gentiles. "A multicultural society in which Jews are simply one of many tolerated groups is likely to meet Jewish interests," he wrote in 1998.

MacDonald claims, then, that even the atheist and antireligious Marx served an eternal Jewish drive to win out over gentiles. Judith Shulevitz, writing in *Slate* in 2000, noted the obvious similarity of this supposedly new biological argument to familiar tropes of anti-Semitism. (The occasion was MacDonald's testimony on

behalf of the Holocaust denier [David Irving](#).)

Though the recent Utah paper shares Darwinian language (genes, evolution, IQ tests) with MacDonald's books, it is, in substance, very different. The Utah researchers define who they are talking about—Ashkenazim—much more precisely. They name the genes that, they believe, are explained by their theory. And they say why they think intelligence would be selected for in this population, and why that effect could explain facts about genetic disease.

Their ideas, in other words, are specific and novel, where MacDonald's are sweeping and familiar from centuries of anti-Semitic propaganda. To see the difference—to avoid the mistake of thinking all evolutionary thinking is crudely reductionist or racist—you have to engage it.

Not taking sides in the vapid Nature-Nurture war saves your attention for the real controversies taking place within disciplines. The Utah paper's ideas aren't daring forbidden knowledge; nor are they stalking horses for prejudice. The paper merits some thought. And if you find yourself comfortably pleased by it, or comfortably disdainful of it, you probably want to think about it some more. 🙄

David Berreby has written for the New York Times Magazine, The New Republic, Slate, The Sciences, Smithsonian, and Discover. His book *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind* will be published in October. He also has a [blog](#).

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