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Meddling with Monkey Metaphors — Capitalism and the Threat Of Impulsive Desires

Julia Rothenberg and Andreas Heinz, MD

Introduction

We are currently witnessing how a set of disturbing discourses is formed that concern the origin of, and the “cure” for, crime and deviance. This constellation is part of a conservative worldview, that, while thoroughly contemporary, harkens back to an idealized past when social order reigned and everyone knew their place. On a more ominous note, it harkens back as well to another constellation of concepts that many had assumed were buried along with their victims, i.e., a call for a return to a homogeneous Gemeinschaft, expulsion from society of an “Other” that embodies all social pathology, and biologic or hereditary explanations of human behavior contingently labeled deviant.

This worldview and its legitimating discourses deserve serious consideration, having become increasingly acceptable within the hallowed halls of academia and taken a firm grip on the public imagination, with very real public policy repercussions. We suspect that recent punitive amendments to our welfare policy (i.e., workfare, time limitations on AFDC), the rapid swelling of the prison system, and the war against the poor, homeless, youth, and minorities, which operates under the guise of a political “quality of life” agenda (Kelling, 1996), are all legitimated by the set of discourses that we intend to examine. More specifically, we will look at how prevailing conservative explanations of social pathologies are constructed. We will examine in particular the two “core” theoretical constructs that underlie

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this worldview. First, we will examine the reconstruction of a sociological “culture of poverty” tradition that locates the source of deviant behavior within a particular set of cultural values and habits that characterize the “underclass.” Theories of poverty centering on a cultural notion of “underclass” have often been constructed by liberal sociologists to underscore the structural rather than the individual nature of poverty. We will examine the way in which conservative theorists have distorted these “underclass” arguments to describe a supposedly “criminogenic” culture, which, through its self-generated pathological behavior produces and reproduces socially threatening behavior. This notion of “underclass” thus becomes the demonized “Other,” which if expunged or contained will eliminate the social ills from which “we” suffer. Second, we will examine the most recent manifestations of the reemergence of sociobiological investigation, which attempts to locate deviant behavior within particular physiological or genetic abnormalities. New neurobiological findings and treatment opportunities of such personal problems as depression, anxiety, and drug dependency stimulate the current popular and academic focus on the biological roots of inadequate social adjustment. As successful as this approach may be in addressing some aspects of these ailments, it centers on individual predisposition and behavior. We will show how this focus neglects social interactions and argue that the limitations of this explanatory model are specifically dangerous when it is applied to “antisocial” acts and “criminal behavior.”

We will examine this new discourse formation, which centers on a racially coded notion of the “underclass,” through the critical lenses of the natural and social sciences. We will examine the reemergence of sociobiological theories as explanations for social order as presented in Crime and Human Nature and The Bell Curve. Then we will look at the contemporary manifestation of the “cultural” explanation for crime and poverty as manifested in recent documents such as DiIulio, Bennett, and Walter’s recently published Body Count. We will show how this discourse constructs a concept of the “underclass” around a notion of violent, impulsive desires that are reified as a biogenetic trait that differentiates between “them” and “us.” To illustrate how this reification plays upon and is supported by current neurobiological research, we will critically examine new findings on the relationship between impulsive aggression and heritable serotonin deficiencies, which currently constitute the most widely quoted neurobiological theory of violent behavior. Finally, we will discuss the ways in which the neocorporate cultural and the sociobiological discourse are combined to shift the focus of blame for the structural pathologies of late capitalism onto the victims and critics of these pathologies.

The Historical Background of Sociobiological Theories on Crime

Theories on the behavior of the poor in general and on crime in particular fluctuate with the historical context in which they emerge. In the 19th century, the
rise of industrial production and the impoverishment of a large sector of the working class was accompanied by malnutrition, sanitary problems, poor housing, alcoholism, prostitution, and other forms of outlawed behavior, such as strikes and bread riots (Autonomie, 1985: 36–38). While the socialist and anarcho-syndicalist movements pointed to the social conditions under which these problems occurred (Tolstoi, 1980: 24), the social and medical sciences rejected this criticism of capitalist exploitation. Instead, a sociobiological explanation of social problems was proposed (Castel, 1983: 296). According to this model, urbanization reduces selective pressure and induces “regeneration,” a biologically coded dysfunction of the central nervous system that manifests itself first as moral vices, then in the form of addictions and neurosis, and finally in severe psychotic states and dementia (Hermle, 1986: 70–73). Degeneration, the fall from the “height of civilized behavior,” was later implicated in an evolutionary account of human development. According to this theory, the highest stage of human evolution is reached in Western European civilization, and social as well as individual problems are interpreted as a regression to a more primitive stage of human development (Heinz, 1997: 169). Mental diseases such as schizophrenia were seen as a remanifestation of a “primitive” mentality, while crime was supposed to be the consequence of aggressive, apish traits in modern-day humans. Lombroso claimed that a person displaying such supposedly “apish” and “primitive” traits would be a “born criminal” (Gould, 1981: 124). This sociobiological account of modern problems offers two advantages: it does not address social conditions and thus does not clash with existing power structures, while proclaiming the primacy of biological factors, which reduces the demand for social interventions.

Deviant from this predominant sociobiological discourse was a movement for progressive social reform, which included the philosopher John Dewey and the pragmatists. This current of thought inspired the founding of American sociology in the 1920s and was influential in the approach of the Chicago School of urban sociology. Also, critical anthropologists such as Boas (1986: 124–126) claimed as early as 1928 that crime is socially defined and has to be addressed within its social context. Moreover, Lombroso’s criteria of “primitivity” proved to be so unspecific that they were widely rejected by ensuing empirical research (Gould, 1981: 127–135). Nevertheless, sociobiological theories on the origin of crime prevailed in American scientific theories until the confrontation with Nazi Germany discredited both biological reductionism and its proposed agenda, eugenicism (Blakey, 1987: 24–26).

The Current Resurgence of Sociobiological Accounts of Crime: IQ and Crime

In the past two decades, a reemergence of conservative theories on the biological roots of crime can be observed. They are highlighted in Wilson and Herrnstein’s book (1986: 78), Crime and Human Nature, which sets out with a
defense of Lombroso and makes a strong claim for biological factors in the genesis of criminal behavior. Wilson and Herrnstein claim that the higher crime rates among the African American population are not sufficiently explained by social disadvantage and may be due to increased psychopathy in African Americans (Ibid.: 468–472). Furthermore, the authors implied that “low intelligence” might be a primary factor causing deviant and criminal behavior in both European and African Americans (Ibid.: 148–172). This argument has been reiterated much more bluntly in the Bell Curve (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994: 235–251), in spite of mostly weak or insignificant findings on the correlation between IQ and crime (Moffitt and DaSilva, 1988: 331–332).

A central point of the Bell Curve’s impact should be examined: Murray and Herrnstein do not start out by blaming all current social problems in the U.S. on African Americans. Rather, they construct the “underclass” as a class of people defined by low IQ (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994: 520–522) and the majority of blacks are seen as one group of people that constitute this “underclass.” Likewise, the recent reemergence of biological theories on crime does not center completely on supposedly “race”-specific characteristics. Rather, a universal human trait, impulsivity, is associated with a predisposition toward “criminal behavior.” In Crime and Human Nature, Wilson and Herrnstein (1986: 173; 204–207) place impulsivity at the center of “psychopathic” behavior that is seen to be the root cause of criminal offenses. In relation to crime, particularly property crime, impulsivity is the inability to delay reward, the demand for instant gratification despite a lack of entitlement (Ibid.: 191, 204). However, what Wilson and Herrnstein originally attributed to criminals — psychopathic impulsivity — is currently supposed to characterize the “underclass” in general. In the popular press, the journalist and commentator Joe Klein (1996: 32, 35) argues that it was the behavior of the poor that caused work to disappear from inner cities (and not vice versa) and postulates that the “underclass” suffers from a “sickness”: “intemperance” and “antisocial behavior.” The articulation of impoverishment as a mental disease due to the moral sickness of the poor can of course be traced back to early capitalism and the construction of “degeneration” (Castel, 1983: 296). In line with this reasoning, Klein (1996: 35) reaches for a “200-year-old” quotation from Adam Smith to illustrate the point that “underclass poverty is more a normative problem than an economic one.” According to Smith, “the vices of levity” and not the devastating work and living conditions of early capitalism (Autonomie, 1985: 23–60) are “always ruinous to the common people” (Klein, 1996: 35). As discussed below, this account of the relationship between impulsivity (or lack of ability or desire to delay gratification) and the poverty and immiseration of a significant portion of the population is reiterated in DiIulio and other’s indictment of “moral poverty.”

Although a discussion of the subversive and self-destructive dialectics of “outlawed” behavior would require a separate occasion, it is worthwhile to point
out that even at the individualist and potentially self-destructive level, the desire for immediate gratification retains some subversive aspects. Desires for immediate gratification among the poor seem to break every major rule of traditional capitalist functioning: they negate the unequal entitlement and access to wealth and opportunities and the Protestant work ethic, the necessity to delay gratification to accumulate capital. As Max Weber (1991: 17) speculated, “capitalism may even be identical with the restraint...of irrational impulse.” Not surprisingly, defendants of the status quo of power relations see impulsivity as the root of social evil — it supposedly characterizes the whole assembly of social foes: psychopaths (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1986: 204–207), “repeated offenders” or “recidivists” (Ibid.: 243), the “underclass” (Klein, 1996: 35), and the prototypic American other, “blacks” (Linnaeus, in Gould, 1981: 35; Wilson and Herrnstein, 1986: 466).

It is, however, important to note that late capitalism, at least on the consumption end, rather than being characterized by a rational and frugal subject, requires a consumer with an infinitely varied and insatiable appetite for the acquisition of commodities. It is this “consuming subject” that is cultivated through the predominant agents of socialization and affects all classes (Currie, 1985: 436). This would tend, then, to mitigate against any subversive potential inherent in the desire for immediate gratification of the poor. In fact, in Mertonian terminology, most property crimes are the result of “innovation” (finding expedient means for the attainment of socially sanctioned goals) rather than reflecting an attitude of “rebellion” (Merton, 1968: 193). This similarity poses a problem for the neoconservative discourse: How does one differentiate between “good” consumption and “bad” impulsivity? As we will show, the neoconservative discourse reconstructs itself around a notion of entitlement by work. It differentiates between a “good legal” and “bad illegal” access to wealth and justifies the unequal distribution of resources by blaming the social problems of capitalism on a critical discourse that poisons the poor.

The Construction of the Underclass — From Social Exclusion to Moral Insanity

The current neoconservative discourse about the social behavior and problems of the poor centers around a notion of a morally corrupt “underclass.” This line of arguments resuscitates an American tradition of inquiry into the “culture of poverty,” which, in the current lexicon, becomes translated into “underclass.” The attempt to explain continuing poverty in a prosperous postwar America has its origins in a liberal tradition and required, in part because of the historical proximity of Nazi ideology, the rejection of sociobiological explanations. Instead, the object of inquiry for theorists of the postwar generation was the particular “culture of poverty” that perpetuated subcultural and deviant behavior characteristics. One of the earliest “culture of poverty” theorists, Oscar Lewis, identified a “quasi-pathological” culture that consisted of 62 traits (Ganz, 1995: 24). According to Lewis,
The culture of poverty...tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effects on the children. By the time the slum children are six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values...and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage...of increased opportunities in their lifetime (in Ganz, 1995: 24).

The term “underclass” was introduced into American sociology by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal in his 1944 study on black poverty, *The United States: An American Dilemma*. In Myrdal’s work the term “underclass” defines an objective position in the class structure and labor market process—the “underclass” identified a segment of the American population who were so excluded from economic processes that their economic status would remain unaffected by changes in the larger economy (Steinberg, 1995: 139). Although Myrdal’s usage of this term was relatively free of cultural and normative assessments, its adoption by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his officially titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* signaled its emergence as a morally, culturally, and racially coded signifier. In this document, Moynihan quoted the fact that AFDC continued to increase between 1962 and 1964 even though unemployment was decreasing and argued that black poverty and family disintegration “had assumed a dynamic all its own, independent of joblessness and poverty” (*Ibid.*: 117). Moynihan, in a move exaggerated by a current generation of conservative cultural critics, reversed the structural cause/cultural effect argument by establishing that it is not in fact poverty, racism, and inequality of opportunity that lead to adaptive behavior within an oppressed community that often runs counter to the norms and values of the more privileged sectors of society. Moynihan’s report instead implied that it is this “tangle of pathologies” and “weakness of the family structure” that is the source of the problems of the “underclass” (*Ibid.*: 43). It is this argument, wildly distorted, that we will find later in the alarmist rhetoric of Dilulio et al.’s *Body Count* (1996).

Although the radicalized academic discourse of the later 1960s and early 1970s saw a plethora of important critical responses to the arguments of the Moynihan report (the internal colonization thesis, Marxist analysis, etc.), we are now witnessing what Steinberg (1995) calls a “white-backlash” in both academia and popular literature on crime and poverty and a reemergence of an almost national obsession with the “underclass.” The reintroduction of this class concept into contemporary social-scientific discourses neither reiterates Myrdal’s structural analysis of the dangers of unregulated capitalism nor implies the reemergence of an analysis of power relations in capitalism. While structural theories stressed the inherent tendency of capitalism to produce cyclic crisis, unemployment, and impoverishment of the proletariat, the modern concept of the “underclass” separates the unfortunate unemployed lot from the (currently) working class. Unemployment is not seen as a regular phenomenon in capitalism, but as the result
of individual faults of the unemployed (Klein, 1996: 34). Consequently, the main characteristic of the "underclass" is not impoverishment, anger, and alienation, but the alleged lack of morality and "work ethics" (Wilson, 1996: 31) that prevent these people from finding and maintaining a job (Gebhardt, 1995: 55). The idea of a chronically unemployed and unmotivated underclass, spoiled by overgenerous welfare programs, prevails in the face of contradicting evidence that shows that a majority of welfare recipients go back to work within 24 months (Chideya, 1995: 38). Moreover, apathy and crime are viewed as causal and not consequential factors of the situation of the poor (Klein, 1996: 35; Siegel, 1993: A15).

How Black Is the Underclass?
Or, How to Color Code "Immoral" Behavior

This contemporary notion of the underclass gravitates around the notion of blackness. With the poor being so effectively split from the rest of the working class, their constitution as a separate group is further promoted by the assumption that it is mostly African Americans who fall under this category. This assumption is very often a pervasive yet implicit notion. For example, when Klein wants to prove that it was the immorality of the underclass that caused employers to move out of inner-city areas and created unemployment, he mentions two findings: the increased robbery rate in New York and the increased divorce rate among African Americans since the 1960s, trends that started at a time when black employment rates were still high (Klein, 1996: 33–34). The interesting ideological construction is not so much the assumption that high divorce rates create an underclass, but the effortless shift that enables Klein to talk about crime rates in the general population and divorce rates among African Americans in the same context. What enables Klein to discuss such seemingly unrelated topics as robberies committed by Americans in general and divorce rates among African Americans in one text is his assumption that both topics relate to a single phenomenon — the creation of the underclass.

For Klein, black people seem so automatically to represent the underclass that no further explication is deemed necessary as to why their overall divorce rates should induce the formation of the "underclass," or how the divorce rate is linked to "antisocial" behavior in general or to teen-age pregnancy rates in particular. Similarly, the underclass is so clearly perceived as deviant that an increased robbery rate is automatically attributed to these people. Klein does not even consider that anyone outside the "underclass" may commit robbery, for example, students with drug addictions or thrill-seeking suburban youths.

Neither does Klein consider that black divorce rates may have increased not only inside the "underclass," but also because middle-class women holding a job are now able to afford to be divorced. Since the underclass is predominantly a moral and not a sociological construct in this discourse, it is sufficient proof that one is underclass if one commits criminal acts or if one deviates from middle-class behavior and happens to be black. Thus, the main characteristic of the underclass
is their deviation from an imagined white middle-class norm (no matter how the actual divorce rates among this middle-class increase), and being African American or committing offenses are seen as sufficient evidence to prove that one differs significantly from white middle-class behavior. In the plain and simple words of Klein (1996: 33), “these poor people are different, sadly, from you and me. They are isolated from us; they have different values.” Klein locates his readers on the “good side” of the moral gap; as can be seen in this statement, “underclass” deviance constitutes both their status and “our” identity — the identity of an educated author and his socially integrated (and presumably white) reader.

**Postmodern Troubles and the Critical Discourse**

With the “underclass” color-coded and effectively split from the rest of the working class, it can now be chastised for its desire for immediate gratification. However, since the late capitalist condition requires a universal desire for consumption, the socially threatening impulsivity of the “underclass” has to be separated from general consumerism. This differentiation is achieved by two maneuvers. In a first step, the neoconservative discourse relocates the blame for the current social ills. The critical discourse of the 1960s and 1970s claimed that capitalism destroys solidarity and subjects people to an alienated competition against each other (Marcuse, 1964: 45). Moreover, different social movements had effectively questioned the morality of exploitation and domination and their underlying constructs — racism, sexism, and working-class inferiority. With the moral foundation of capitalism under attack, the justification of social functioning wore thin and gave room for the articulation of desires that were supposed to break the cycle of alienated existence. The resulting rejection of the Protestant work ethic and the praise of sexuality and spiritually illuminating drug use (de Ropp, 1997: 129–131) failed to affect capitalist functioning. However, the contemporary remnants of 1960’s critical theory — a “bad consciousness” about the reality of exploitation and the awareness of how relative the justification of capitalist society is — are now blamed for capitalism’s social ills in the neoconservative discourse. Thus, Dilulio (1996: 198) claims that besides the upper classes’ celebration of unfettered freedom, their display of “moral relativism…spreads out to the rest of society” and spoils the lower classes. Likewise, Klein (1993: 35) argues that it is not the unequal distribution of wealth (an idea he even stops short of mentioning explicitly) but its visibility that spurs underclass immorality. If only the rich were more restrained in their display of wealth and more convinced of their entitlement, the underclass could control their desires.

A second maneuver shifts the focus from the unjust distribution of wealth to the immorality of the poor. As if the poor were simply awaiting this philosophical opportunity, moral relativism is accused of justifying “underclass” efforts to get that to which they are not entitled. In an elegant subversion of the critical discourse, DiJulio et al. dismiss claims that the unequal distribution of opportunities lies at
the root of social problems and center instead on the illegal attempts of the poor to acquire a larger share of social wealth:

Racism is an even less persuasive explanation for the current crime problem than poverty.... Moral poverty makes both racism and legal loopholes mere backdrops in a crime drama featuring family disintegration, child abuse, and child neglect. And moral poverty, not economic poverty is what marks some disadvantaged youngsters for a life of crime and drugs while passing over others (Dilulio et al., 1996: 41, 56).

Dilulio et al.’s lack of curiosity about the causal relationship between economic inequality and discrimination and the symptoms he lumps together as “moral poverty” are evidenced in his argument that “all other things being equal, kids rich or poor, who get adequate medical care, learn well and stay in school, receive meaningful preparation for available jobs...are under most conditions less likely to become violent or repeat criminals” (Ibid.: 40). The obvious correlation, especially in the United States, between adequate medical care, decent schooling, meaningful preparation for “available” jobs, etc., and a middle-class income, is one statistic that is not explored.

In a further attempt to characterize the “underclass” by their illegal behavior, Dilulio et al. reiterate Wilson’s “broken window” argument in a radicalized version. Wilson had blamed the squalor of the urban landscape primarily on the disorderly behaviors of juvenile delinquents and other members of the “undeserving poor.” Dilulio and others, however, do abide by the conventional distinction between the “undeserving poor” and those who, until recently, have been presented to the public imagination as deserving of sympathy and possible charity — the growing population of homeless and destitute: “As we have seen in New York City...cleaning streets and neighborhoods of panhandlers, vandals, graffiti, boom box cars, public drunkenness, street prostitutes, and squeegee pests can do a lot to reduce violent crime” (Ibid.: 16).

Now that the pathologic agent in the body politic has been acknowledged, Dilulio et al. give it a name so that it may be identified and purged. They dub the rapidly growing threat (“ticking time bomb”) to our nation’s health “super predators.” This “thickening rank” of juvenile “super predators” is described as:

radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more teenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob...and create serious communal disorders.... To these mean street youth, the words “right” and “wrong” have no morally fixed meaning.... The things that super predators get by their criminal behavior — sex, drugs, money — are their own immediate rewards. Nothing else matters to them. So long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes “naturally”: murder, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high (Ibid.: 27).
Dilulio et al. do not fail to emphasize that the “underclass” would never be so demanding had they not been encouraged by a foe in the ranks of the upper and middle classes — misguided humanitarians and left-leaning liberals. According to Dilulio et al. (1996: 16), blame is due to a “small group of anti-incarceration advocates...[who have] perpetrated...pernicious ideas which have formed an intellectual template for crime and punishment in America” and to people who have promoted “public policies which throw taxpayer’s money at programs aimed at ameliorating the material deprivation of the ghetto poor.” This, as Dilulio et al. claim, “further serves to enforce this community’s deviant habits as well as their sense of entitlement, rather than providing moral standards and guidance.” In this neoconservative discourse, a lack of authority displayed by the ruling classes leads to a threatening vision — the emergence of the “underclass beast,” a vision cast in Lombrosian terms of the “animalistic Other.” Dilulio et al. do not meddle with current biological models to support their animalization of the social foe. Others, however, have not exerted this polite restraint.

**Impulsivity and Violent Behavior — A Hereditary Neurobiological Defect?**

If, as the neoconservative discourse states, the structure of capitalism had not been questioned by the critical discourse, the poor would not feel entitled to wealth without toil and would willingly find their place among the other unguaranteed minimum-wage laborers. Or — where their animalization has gone too far — they would not. While Murray originally accused a social factor, welfare, of promoting laziness among an underclass that finds it more efficient to cash in state benefits than to work for minimum wage (Murray, 1994: xvi), the newest wave of arguments stress biological factors in the explanation of “underclass deviance.” Underclass impulsivity and delinquency is recast as a biologically determined and predominantly heritable trait. The renewed sociobiological discourse can be traced back to Wilson and Herrnstein’s *Crime and Human Nature*, which tried to explain the higher crime rates in the black population by their supposedly increased impulsivity (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1986: 466). At this point, two biological reifications meet: the scientifically increasingly untenable construct of biologically defined races (Livingstone, 1993: 133–141; Birdsell, 1981: 353) and the emerging theory of a heritable disposition toward crime and violence.

In a footnote in *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray state that they originally wanted to write a book about “individual differences generally and social policy,” but had abstained from doing so because “only for criminal behavior is the scientific literature extensive enough to have permitted a thorough presentation of individual differences other than intellectual” (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994: 711–712). Yet the reader will be surprised to find no reiteration of the idea of impulsive black crime in a book that strongly bets on the validity of racial classifications. What had happened between the publication of *Crime and
Human Nature in 1985 and The Bell Curve in 1994 was the failure of a first attempt to explain “underclass violence” within a sociobiological discourse. In 1992, F.K. Goodwin, then the head of the Federal Violence Initiative, compared the behavior of certain violent rhesus monkeys with that of inner-city youths (Stone, 1993: 1584) and stated that we may not only metaphorically live in an urban “jungle.” According to Goodwin, both young male rhesus monkeys with a neurobiological defect and American inner-city youth supposedly “knock each other off,” and only “half of them survive to adulthood” — the “hyperaggressive” and “hypersexual” (Goodwin, 1992: 119–120). Goodwin was criticized not because of his scientific error (the defective monkeys actually have less intercourse and fewer offspring than their normal counterparts), but because of the comparison between monkeys and the largely African American and Hispanic inner-city youths (Breggin and Breggin, 1993: 9).

In the ensuing protest, Goodwin resigned from his position. The research he talked about, however, is far from dead. The monkeys in question were selectively bred for low serotonin turnover rates, i.e., for a relative deficiency in a neurotransmitter that has for been at the center of neurobiological research on impulsive and violent behavior for more than a decade (Roy et al., 1988). The importance of the “serotonin hypothesis” of impulsive and violent behavior is evidenced by a recent issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry (June 1996), the leading organ of clinical psychiatry: three out of nine articles on the biological correlates of delinquent behavior centered on a supposed serotonin defect. Serotonin is a neurochemical substance that transports information between different nerve cells (LeMarquand et al., 1994: 326–327). Serotonin is generally known to the public as the target of Prozac, the ubiquitous antidepressant that is used to cure all kinds of depression and social anxieties. In a recent paper in Science, the normal variation in the recycling process of this neurotransmitter has been associated with the individual disposition toward depression and anxiety-related traits (Lesch et al., 1996). Traditionally, however, serotonin has not always been seen as the substance that will make you happy. Instead, Grey (1982) hypothesized that serotonin activates a system that inhibits behavior, hypothetically by stimulating fear or anxiety. Consequently, a lack of serotonin may predispose an individual toward disinhibited behavior. Grey’s hypothesis was based on ideas promoted by Eysenck (1967), who had argued that socially adequate functioning requires the presence of strict role models who teach children which socially inappropriate behaviors must be suppressed to be avoided. When the internalized rules are thus violated, serotonergic activation of an internal punishment system seems necessary to create anxiety that induces behavior inhibition (Gray, 1982). Conscience was thus recast as a biological system that can punish the wrongdoer only if adequately supplied with serotonin, a far cry from the competing theory that Prozac brightens the daily horror by increasing this very substance in the brain.
The present uncertainties about the rewarding or punishing role of serotonergic neurotransmission notwithstanding, several studies found indications of reduced serotonin turnover rates in aggressive monkeys (Higley et al., 1992: 438) and in human violent alcoholic offenders (Roy et al., 1988: 261–262; Virkunnen et al., 1996: 526). Moreover, it has been argued that findings of reduced serotonin turnover indicate a predominantly or at least substantially heritable serotonin deficit in violent offenders and antisocial personalities (LeMarquand, 1994: 326–327; Virkunnen et al., 1996: 528). As most behaviors are regulated by gene–environment interactions, it seems to be a plausible hypothesis that genes exert a considerable influence on violent behavior (Virkunnen et al., 1996: 528). This widespread notion is, however, not supported by relevant empirical studies. In comprehensive Danish and Swedish adoption studies, no genetic contribution to violent crime was found (Bohmann et al., 1988: 1239; Brennan and Mednick, 1993: 22). Although this finding has been clearly stated in original and review articles, it is widely ignored in the current debate on serotonin and violence (Roy et al., 1988; LeMarquand et al., 1994; Virkunnen et al., 1996). Instead, the study most regularly quoted when the genetic contribution to serotonin turnover is addressed is a study of rhesus monkeys. In this study, heritable factors controlled about 65% of the variance in serotonin levels (Higley et al., 1993: 619). In the discussion of his study, however, Higley quoted a twin study in humans that showed a considerably lower genetic contribution to serotonin turnover in Homo sapiens: heritability accounted for only 35% of the variance and the authors clearly stated that their finding indicates a predominant environmental control of serotonin turnover in humans (Oxenstierna et al., 1986: 26). It is very likely that the higher complexity found in learned human social behavior is reflected in higher degrees of freedom of serotonin regulation and thus in a decreased importance of the genetic regulation of serotonin turnover.

Although the study by Oxenstierna et al. was originally quoted in relevant articles on the subject, it has not been mentioned in the last years in the debate on the heritability of violence (Roy et al., 1988; Cloninger, 1995; Virkunnen et al., 1996). Like the absence of any discussion of the Danish or Swedish adoption studies, this omission of a human study in favor of rhesus research points to a selective neglect of studies that do not support the genetic hypothesis of violent behavior.

If, however, the relevant studies point to environmental factors in the determination of serotonin turnover, is there any indication how serotonin turnover and environment may interact? One argument points to the effect of smoking on serotonin turnover: most studies of humans measured concentrations of the serotonin metabolite (“5-hydroxyindole acetic acid”) in the cerebrospinal fluid to assess serotonin turnover (Roy et al., 1988; Virkunnen et al., 1996). However, serotonin is metabolized by an enzyme that is inhibited by smoking (Sherwin, 1991: 210; Fowler et al., 1996a; 1996b). These findings indicate that smoking
alone may reduce the production of the serotonin metabolite and that persons with alcoholism, violent behavior, or “antisocial personalities” may display reduced levels of this metabolite simply because they smoke more than persons in the control group.

A second argument emphasizes that social stress interacts with serotonin concentrations. In mutant mice lacking a certain serotonin receptor, no increased aggression rates compared to the “wild type” were found. If, however, the mutant mice are subjected to significant environmental stress, such as prolonged isolation followed by the presence of an intruder, enhanced aggressive behavior is found (Saudou et al., 1994: 1877). On the other hand, the serotonergic deficit may itself be caused by social stress, especially in humans who display a predominantly environmental control of serotonin turnover (Oxenstierna et al., 1986: 26). A neurobiological pathway has been suggested by which negative life experiences may decrease serotonin turnover. In rodents, social separation leads to long-lasting increases in the activity of stress hormones such as cortisol (Ezzel, 1996: 28). Increased activity of these hormones was also found in depressed patients and seems to reduce serotonin turnover by the induction of a liver enzyme that breaks down the necessary precursor of serotonin production (Meltzer et al., 1994: 180). Thus, social isolation stress may reduce plasma levels of this serotonin precursor, which results in a decrease of central serotonin production.

**Fight, Flight, or Exclusion? Models of Social Stress**

In a biocultural model of human stress reactions, Blakey (1994) argued that stress reactions are a “general fear response that has long been adaptive for social as for physical fears” (p. 158). Blakey stresses the importance of social cooperation in human evolution and argues that stress reactions would be triggered by “threats of social disengagement,” thus providing a warning signal that helps to “motivate social reengagement” (pp. 158–162). Stress reactions thus help to guarantee the functioning of social behavior. Consequently, the strongest stressors are those that represent a loss of social connections, be it a loss of a family member or the exclusion from a social network (p. 161). In modern society, whole groups of people live under the constant threat of exclusion, due to belonging to social minorities, the poor, or any discriminated group of people (pp. 161–162). Therefore, it is plausible that individuals exposed to social deprivation, discrimination, and poverty suffer from high stress levels. In these people, the chronic stress reaction loses its adaptive function and can induce organic disease, feelings of helplessness, and depression (p. 164). This assumption has been supported by a study in Britain: the highest stress levels were found in immigrant minorities (pp. 171–175).

Similarly, it is possible that the group of people usually classified as the “underclass” in the U.S. — impoverished whites, Hispanics, and African Americans — actually experiences the highest stress levels. A recent study of African
Americans confirmed that social stresses such as racist discrimination are reflected in potentially health-endangering physiological reactions such as increased blood pressure (Krieger and Sydney, 1996). Of specific relevance for our topic is that rodents that were exposed to inescapable stress develop a behavior called “learned helplessness,” which is associated with increased cortisol levels (Nankai et al., 1995) and reversed by serotonergic neurotransmission (Poncelet et al., 1995; Petty et al., 1996). Humans who suffer from continuous threat of social exclusion may display some of the behavioral and neurobiological consequences of chronic stress, such as a stress-induced serotonin deficit and a constant perception of insecurity, resulting in aggressive or depressive-apathetic behavior.

This interpretation is supported by the observation that a dysfunctional serotonin turnover in both animals and humans is associated with the experience of threat (Gray, 1982: 14; Virkunnen et al., 1994: 32). Virkunnen et al. (1994: 32) found increased anxiety in alcohol-dependent violent offenders with low serotonin turnover, while Knutson et al. (1996a: 8) observed that medically increased serotonin turnover reduced negative emotions, assaultiveness, and irritability in healthy volunteers. It is important to note that the observed decrease in assaultiveness and irritability was statistically accounted for by more general reductions in negative emotions such as anxiety and sadness (Ibid.: 9). Like other human biocultural responses (Thomas et al., 1979: 5–7), aggressive reactions may be learned as an adaptive behavior within a certain social context, such as life under the condition of impoverishment and discrimination. Again, such a presumably adaptive feature of aggressive behavior in certain social contexts cannot be examined in animal experiments. As valid as rodent and monkey studies are for discovering neurobiological mechanisms, they are necessarily restricted in their relevance for human social problems. If these restrictions of animal experiments are not considered, biological reductionism of social interactions is inevitable.

Human Super Predators and Violent Primates — The Eerie Perspective of a Resuscitated Sociological Discourse

When DiIulio et al. call inner-city youth “super predators” (DiIulio et al., 1996: 27), they do not back up this metaphor with the notion of primates predisposed to violence by a heritable serotonin deficit. Their conscious use of animal metaphors in the labeling of young delinquents, however, not only revitalizes Lombroso’s idea that “primitive” or “apish” traits mark a subject as a “born criminal” (Gould, 1981: 124), but also supports the notion that these brutes cannot be rehabilitated. According to DiIulio et al. (1996: 14),

a false premise has emasculated the criminal justice system: the notion that the first purpose of punishment is to rehabilitate criminals. We disagree. Strongly. The first purpose is moral, to exact a price for transgressing the rights of others.
In other words, Dilulio advocates a rollback to a pre-Classical period in the history of criminal justice. What our society suffers from, then, is modernity. The cure proposed is a return to premodern forms of community, with an emphasis on religious institutions as the foundation of all social life, a hierarchical system in which all accept their lot in life as part of God's master plan, where the poor should be humble and weak and justice should be harsh, punitive, and vengeful. A similar brand of antimodernism is articulated by Kelling, Coles, Wilson, and others, when they complain that it is our culture's obsession with civil rights and an "ethos of self-expression" (Currie, 1985: 227) that encourages social disorder and contempt for the police and other agents of social control to flourish. The "cure" in this case is a harsher and more punitive justice system, as well as more extensive and invasive community policing — moves that clearly contradict modern norms of civil liberties, privacy, and freedom of speech.

While caution must always be exercised in making such comparisons, we think that this discourse must be examined in light of other antimodern discourses in our century. We live in a period of structural problems and social strife, which are intimately tied to changes in the global economy. This is not the occasion for a deeper analysis of these developments. However, we are all aware of the effects loss of industrial jobs, regressive redistribution of income, drastic cuts in social service spending, and deunionization have had on American society. These changes require a legitimating public discourse — and the Right has effectively constructed this discourse. The discourse hinges upon the demonization of the very class of people most victimized by these changes. Public attention is then diverted from the increasing economic insecurities and inequalities that characterize contemporary life, and collective anxiety is effectively channeled against poor African Americans and Hispanics, particularly young males, newly christened by Dilulio as "super predators."

Thus, the sociobiological and neoconservative cultural discourse is characterized by a fuzzy yet threatening picture of the "Evil Other." In the sociobiological discourse, the discussion of deviant behavior can effortlessly shift between different aspects of this "impulsive Other." At times, studies concerning impulsivity and aggression in humans address problems of the "cognitive" underclass (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994: 520–522); at other times, they are directed at the explanation of criminal behavior (Roy et al., 1988: 261–262) and of the situation of inner-city minorities (Breggin and Breggin, 1993: 9). The notion of the underclass gravitates not only around African Americans, but also around a notion of criminal behavior (Klein, 1996: 33–34; Gebhardt, 1995: 54–59). As we have tried to demonstrate, current neurobiological research centers on genetic factors that cannot be addressed by social intervention (as long as one refuses to follow Murray's call for a reassessment of eugenicist immigration politics [Herrnstein and Murray, 1974: 359–364]) and on individual factors such as maternal neglect (Higley et al., 1996a: 631) that can be blamed on the "underclass" itself. There is
an obvious absence of any assessment of social factors such as impoverishment and social exclusion, which may play a major role in causing whatever neurobiological and behavioral abnormalities that may be found in this socially defined group of people.

Although the immediate impact of the dominating sociobiological discourse on crime remains evasive, a study of the impact of previous theories in this field may help to elucidate some possible effects. In 1984, Murray published *Loosing Ground*, in which he argued for the abolition of cash assistance to the poor, because it would destroy the pressure on them to work (Teles, 1996: 150–151). It took 12 years for Congress to follow through and to actually eliminate welfare, without neglecting to previously consult with Murray and Herrnstein (*Ibid.*: 152). In 1994, Murray stated that the cuts in welfare assignments during the Reagan era were not to his satisfaction, as welfare was not altogether abolished; however, the GOP’s subsequent new plans came much closer to his agenda (Murray, 1994: xv-xvi). Likewise, the social effects of the current sociobiological discussion on violent aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, and the alleged cognitive impairment of the “underclass” may not be discernible in the near future. However, when the effects of welfare abolition become visible and an additional 1.6 million adults and one million children are living in poverty (Urban Institute, 1996: A27), sociobiological theories will play their role in explaining this situation. It is a no-brainer that sociobiological research will then discover that the poorest of the poor have increased rates of alcohol and drug abuse, dysfunctional families and poor social networks, low IQ, and a high rate of “maternal neglect” and that they mostly belong to minority populations in the U.S. Given the current establishment of a genetic discourse on crime and “deviance,” these findings will be interpreted as the result and not the cause of the misery. The affirmative role of biosocial sciences as well as a portion of social scientific inquiry toward the socioeconomic system will ensure future funding by private corporations and the state; whether this science can be in the interest of the studied humans remains highly doubtful.

NOTES

1. It is interesting to note that even within the conservative discourse, some voices refuse to blame this rise in unemployment rates on individual or family pathologies. Sowell (1994: 95) argues that an economic factor, the subsequent increases in the minimum wage in the 1960s, rendered black labor less competitive and increased teen-age unemployment. Although this argument denies class struggles in favor of a purely mechanistic model of employment practices, it refrains from speculation over the psychopathology of African Americans.
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