

## PROSPECT September 2006

[This is the text of the review as submitted. It was shortened before publication]

### **Killer Instinct**

**The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred** by Niall Ferguson

Allen Lane, 816 pages, £25

Review by Nicholas Humphrey

Writing in response to Germany's invasion of Belgium in 1914, Sir James Barr, a consultant physician and former chairman of the British Medical Association, had this to say:

The German Kultur must be exterminated, and this savage breed as far as possible wiped out. . . Germany has produced no genius, there is no scope for individualism, her work is the collective wisdom of commonplace savants, she has never produced nor is ever likely to produce a super-man. . . The Allies have shown their manhood and the capacity to rule, we must therefore . . . raise healthy men and women who will hold their own in the battle of life. . . This can all be rapidly attained by intelligent artificial selection, and the nation which produces the finest, noblest and most intellectual race will win in the long run.

As Niall Ferguson relates, by the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the idea that human races must struggle for biological supremacy – the “meme” of racism, he calls it – was already spreading round the world. Ways of thinking about human beings that would have been inconceivable a hundred years earlier – the survival of the fittest, selective advantage, biological dead-ends and supermen – had moved beyond airy speculation in Victorian salons and were being touted as incontestable scientific truths. The question was not *if* human beings were still evolving under natural selection, but what to make of this evolutionary progress and *how to manage it*.

Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton came up with the idea of eugenics, Herbert Spencer championed Social Darwinism. Yet it was not in Britain that these ideas found

greatest favour. As with other British firsts, racist eugenics was something that other nations took up as their own – quickly outdoing the inventors in dedication and professionalism. While Sir James Barr and the British Eugenics movement remained comparative amateurs (Ferguson makes no mention of them), Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan, Turkey, Serbia were soon showing how the racist game could be played once people got serious about it.

*The War of the World* tells what happened next. In this long – but always gripping – survey of “history’s age of hatred” Ferguson piles fact upon fact, horror on horror, to make the case that racism was a key ingredient in most if not all of the twentieth century’s uniquely cruel and devastating wars across the globe. He does not say that racism was ever the sole cause: economic uncertainty, the breakdown of tired empires, accidents of history all played their part. The tectonic plates of the old world order were already on the move. But racial antipathy was always present, if not as the prime cause of the slippage, then as a near inevitable component of the tsunami that again and again followed the initial quake.

The history is raw, revealing, carefully argued and surprising. This is very much a revisionist account, with little respect for what have become standard assumptions about what moved events along. The writing is unabashedly opinionated and judgmental, and laced with withering criticism of those with whom the author disagrees. What is described on the dustjacket as Ferguson’s “splendid panache and seemingly effortless debonair wit” comes across in places as cock-suredness and sarcasm. Still, if this is what it means to write “right-wing history”, so be it. It certainly makes for good reading. Punk Gibbon is just fine, provided there’s enough Gibbon – and there is.

So, I would gladly have left my review of the book at this point, with a whole-hearted recommendation of it as an important new analysis of the social, economic and political causes of the breakdown of civilised values, if only Ferguson had been wise enough to leave it there himself. But he has not been. He has written an Introduction of seventy pages, in which he reaches out to Evolutionary Psychology for further scientific insights into the historical process he describes in the body of the book. It seems clear he regards this not just as an extra afterthought but possibly as the most important intellectual contribution he has to make (see for example his *Guardian* article: “We must understand why racist belief systems persist”, 11/07/2006). And, to judge by other reviews, his peers have taken him at his own word as a bridge between history and scientific psychology. I may say that I and others on the psychology side have long been hoping for just such a rapprochement between our science and theirs. Theodosius Dobzhansky famously said “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,” and many of us would now argue that this can be

extended to “nothing in psychology”. Has Ferguson at last seen how history too can gain from taking an evolutionary perspective?

The racial world view, Ferguson writes is “a singularly successful ‘meme’ that was already replicating itself all over the world by the start of the twentieth century.” But here, I’m afraid, he is already off to a bad start. For what can he think he’s adding of explanatory value by calling it a “meme”? Well, what he *might* be adding would be the fascinating if alarming possibility that racist ideas are *self-serving*: that they owe their success to their peculiar capacity to turn men’s minds to serve the ends of racist ideology rather than human beings themselves. The term “meme” was in fact introduced by Richard Dawkins to mean an element of culture that works in the mind something like a virus, changing the behaviour of the individual it infects in such a way as to help spread itself from one mind to another — even though the carrier may get no personal benefit and may actually be harmed. In his *Guardian* article Ferguson explicitly uses the phrase “a virus of the mind”, suggesting he does indeed think of racism as something that has spread between people, not because it benefits people to be racists, but because it benefits racism to recruit people to propagate it.

This suggestion is not such an outlandish one, in theory. Daniel Dennett, for example, has argued persuasively that just such an analysis might help explain certain aspects of religious belief. But could it possibly be a helpful explanation, in practice, in the case of racism? On the evidence of Ferguson’s book, the answer is clearly No. As he shows again and again people have in fact adopted racist attitudes because it has suited them all too well as individual human beings to do so – out of naked egotism, the pursuit of economic advantage, the desire to eliminate competitors and gain living-space (the Nazi’s notorious “lebensraum”). So, racism, far from being a troublesome invader that, other things being equal, people might have wanted to throw off, takes hold precisely because it appeals to rational self-interest – whether the lofty ambitions of a Galton to improve the overall human stock, or of a Hitler to preserve the German Volk. That’s precisely the problem, and Ferguson’s use of the term “meme”, by hinting at a quite different dynamic for racism’s propagation, misses the central point (which is actually his own point).

Still, the concept of a meme is a slippery (and some evolutionary theorists would say an unsatisfactory) one. So perhaps we should not be too hard on Ferguson for making a nod in the direction of a fashionable evolutionary concept, even if he gets it wrong. Unfortunately, this is only the beginning of his flirtation with a body of research he does not understand, and not the most culpable part of it. For it turns out that Ferguson wants to have it several ways at once about racism. While on the one hand he calls it a meme, he also

claims elsewhere in the Introduction that is actually not a cultural product at all: not something people learn from others but instead an instinct that has been hardwired into human nature. Human beings, he suggests, have evolved to fear and hate other humans who are physically – and genetically – dissimilar, because this has been an effective way of increasing their own reproductive success.

How so? Because, he assures us, if we are nice to such strangers, the next thing is we'll be having sex with them – and breeding with distant strangers is a bad strategy if we want our own genes to prosper. “For there is evidence from the behaviour of both humans and other species that nature does not necessarily favour breeding between genetically very different members of the same species.” The phrase “does not necessarily favour”, is, for Ferguson, uncharacteristically weak. And, as it happens, so it should be. For the evidence that in human beings breeding with distantly related members of the human species has any deleterious biological consequences is almost non-existent.

Ferguson cites just one possible example, and gets it back to front. “When a Chinese woman marries a European man, the chances are relatively high that their blood groups may be incompatible, so that only the first child they conceive will be viable.” The problem at issue is the possibility that a rhesus-negative (Rh-) woman will mate with a rhesus-positive (Rh+) man and so – since the Rh+ gene is dominant – have a Rh+ baby with which she is incompatible. But as it happens in reality almost no Chinese people are Rh-, so the chance of this happening when a Chinese woman mates with a European man is negligible (less than 1%). Europeans however are 15% Rh-. So when a European woman mates with a Chinese man the risk is certainly important (15%), but hardly greater than when she mates with “one of her own”, a European man (13%).

Ferguson's claim here is not just wrong, it is alarmist and irresponsible. The reality is that in general humans run no significant additional biological risks from interracial breeding. And there is a simple reason: namely that, compared to most animal species, human beings are extraordinarily homogeneous genetically. In his bibliography Ferguson cites a paper in support of his ideas that deals primarily with “optimal outbreeding” in quails. But what goes for quails – or for chimpanzees for that matter – is simply not what goes for homo sapiens. True there may have been a time, earlier in human evolution, when distinct biological *species* of hominins, all descended from the same ape-like stock, were living together in Africa, and interbreeding might have been tempting – yet unproductive. But even then there is no reason to think that some kind of instinctive race- or species-hatred was required to limit sexual relations. In general the boundaries between biological species can be and are maintained by

a combination of positive sexual preferences and historical opportunity. Horses and donkeys don't have to hate each other, even though mules are a dead-end for their genes: it's enough that typically – in nature – they prefer their own kind.

This is not to deny, of course, that human beings have at times seen miscegenation as a threat to their traditions and their community. Ferguson provides chapter and verse that it has too often been so. But it is to deny is that this has anything to do with an evolved taboo against mixing – and having sex – with people who may have a slightly different set of genes. When Ferguson says, following his discussion of the supposed genetic risks: “we should not lose sight of the basic instincts buried within even the most civilized men. These instincts were to be unleashed time and again after 1900. They were a large part of what made the Second World War so ferocious”, he is talking in a way that no scientist could countenance. This is Konrad Lorenz, Robert Ardrey talk from fifty years ago, not modern evolutionary psychology.

Denis Healey's First Law of Holes was “When you're in one, stop digging”. Yet Ferguson now gives his already faltering evolutionary thesis a further twist. For it turns out he does not actually believe that human beings always instinctively recoil from interracial mating. In fact, he admits, sometimes the opposite is true: the exotic is erotic. “The key point to grasp from the outset is that the ‘hatred’ so often blamed for ethnic conflict is not a straightforward emotion. Rather, we encounter time and again that volatile ambivalence, that mixture of aversion and attraction.” Thus, Ferguson notes, several leading Nazi anti-Semites had Jewish mistresses, while a Serb general guilty of genocide kept a Muslim woman as a sex slave. And, as for common soldiers, the rape of women from a vanquished ethnic group has been routine throughout history. True, when soldiers rape their victims they are seldom driven simply by lust, let alone by the thought of making babies. And even when they are (as when Serb soldiers boasted of planting “Little Četnik's” in Muslim women), the man is making no commitment to supporting the offspring – so Ferguson's genetic risk considerations hardly count. Still, the evidence doesn't exactly speak to there being a lack of sexual interest.

At one point Ferguson suggests that the explanation for this apparent aberration – the seemingly unnatural behaviour of being attracted to someone of a different race – is that is indeed aberrant: “those who are drawn to ‘the Other’ may in fact be atypical in their sexual

predilections.” But he does not sound convinced. And by the end of the book, he throws a rope instead to Freud’s ideas about the co-existence in the human psyche of Life and Death instincts. “For all its unscientific and confessedly speculative character, Freud’s analysis went to the elusive heart of hatred itself, by capturing its essential ambivalence – its combination of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, of the sexual and the morbid.”

A book that starts off by bravely promising a new world of scientific insights as to why human beings commit the atrocities they do, and ends up – however apologetically – appealing to Freud, has clearly lost faith in its own project. But what a shame. It didn’t have to be like this. The project remains as important as ever, and it could have been – still could be – be truly illuminating.

If only Ferguson had recognised (as he comes close to doing) that what underlies most of the wars he describes so graphically, even those in which talk of race is on everybody’s lips, is not really antagonism between *biologically unique* groups of people who threaten to contaminate each other’s genetic fitness, but antagonism between *culturally united* groups of people who threaten to compromise each other’s prosperity and way of life. That’s to say, it’s not antagonism between *races* who must maintain their genetic distance from each other but antagonism between *social tribes* who must maintain their internal solidarity – through bonds of loyalty, commerce, religion, language and so on. Yet Ferguson seems to be so taken by his own biologising, that even when the warring parties are ethnically indistinguishable – Huns and Tommies in World War One is his example, but it might be Catholic and Protestant Irish, Arab and Jewish Palestinians, Montagues and Capulets – he still wants to see the fighting as being derived somehow from instinctive racial hatred. And maybe it’s because of this that he almost entirely ignores the body of good research on group identification and inter-group conflict that has been done within traditional sociology and social psychology over the last hundred years.

This is all the more surprising and regrettable, given that this more traditional research has recently received a considerable boost from just the direction Ferguson himself looks to for new ideas, namely the study of human evolution. There is now a rich literature dealing from an evolutionary perspective with precisely the topics that loom so large in this book: distinctions between “Us” and “Them”, the psychology of coalition formation, stereotyping, dehumanization of the enemy, terror management, and so on. Interestingly

enough, what the new work is showing is that the evolution of cooperation, on which the success of human beings has so much depended, has been achieved largely through redesigning the landscape of human social emotions so as to make people ever more capable of setting up and policing social contracts – even with strangers. But just as Ferguson suspects, it's not all roses. The moral passions that have enabled humans to achieve astonishing feats of collaboration, come in pairs: trust and suspicion, gratitude and vengeance, pride and shame, admiration and detestation. No accident, then, that when human beings are good they are very very good, but when they are bad they are horrid. Sometimes very very horrid..

*The War of the World*, for all its compendious virtues, is a wasted opportunity. It reads like a Whitaker's Almanack of human hatred. All the facts are there. It contains everything and more that a scientific historian might want to bring to court to as evidence of the culpability of humans as a species. Ferguson – going admirably against the grain of his profession – sets out to prove just how much of human history is down to human nature. Situated in Harvard and Oxford, strongholds of evolutionary thinking, he should have been about as well placed as anyone could be to call on expert witnesses to help make his case. And yet he muffs it.