Review

Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2016), 464 pp. ISBN: 978-0-69116-685-8. \$29.95/£22.95 hbk.

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Acuity, incisiveness, and ingenuity characterize Joseph Henrich's book *The Secret of Our Success*, making it a pleasurable read. It is written in an enthralling and limpid style which further contributes to the reading experience. Continuous cross-references between chapters similarly increase the readability of the book and convey the impression of a well-structured work. In addition to a brief preface, the book consists of 17 relatively short chapters with captivating titles such as "How to Make a Cultural Species" (Chapter 4); "On the Origin of Faith" (Chapter 7); and "When We Crossed the Rubicon" (Chapter 15). The book contains a bibliography, useful tables, maps, photos, endnotes, as well as a comprehensive index of names and subjects. Finally, it is graciously free of orthographical and spelling mistakes (see, however, pp. 94, 275, 335).

Henrich focuses on the astonishingly cultural nature of human beings. Humans share almost 99 percent of their genes with their most proximate relatives among the apes, but they are also markedly different because of their ability to envision and create other worlds, to set up complex systems of rewards and punishment and to abide by the norms endorsed by them, to engage in communication with invisible agents like gods, to create immense groups, etc. The core question of the book targets the following double conundrum: how could evolution produce such a creature, and how does the answer to this question enable us to understand human behaviour and psychology. Rather than turning this into a one-sided examination of panhuman nature, Henrich plays a clever double-game by which he both gives human nature and cultural diversity their due parts. This is admirable, but it also calls for a careful balance between accentuating historical specificity and laying stress on fundamental human traits. Although I have

some queries about the accomplishment of this goal, I believe Henrich in general succeeds with his overall objective.

As an advocate of dual inheritance theory, Henrich lays stress on the continuous interactions between what we, for analytical reasons, may designate culture and biology, while also acknowledging that there is no culture which is not part and parcel of biology. In one among many lucid formulations, Henrich accentuates how “[c]ulture, and cultural evolution, are then a consequence of genetically evolved psychological adaptations for learning from other people” (p. 35; cf. pp. 259, 263, 277).

In chapter 1 Henrich underscores how humans are different from other animals due to their cultural nature. The cultural process of self-domestication drove genetic evolution to make humans exceptionally groupish and rule-abiding. Culture is defined as “the large body of practices, techniques, heuristic tools, motivations, values, and beliefs that we all acquire while growing up, mostly by learning from other people”, that is, as socially transmitted information (p. 3). Thereby Henrich does not deny the existence of culture among other animals, but by placing emphasis on “cumulative culture” he singles out humans as the cultural species *par excellence*.

Chapter 2 makes it clear that three traditional explanations for human superiority over the planet do not hold true. Neither generalized intelligence, nor specialized mental abilities evolved for survival in the distant past hunter-gatherer environment, nor cooperative instincts can account for human success in terms of ecological dominance (p. 12). Rather, the reason should be sought in the human capacity for social learning or our immense penchant for culture. Looking back at lost European explorers in chapter 3, Henrich vividly demonstrates his point by emphasizing how these explorers only survived by means of cultural adaptations involving “tools and know-how about finding and processing food, locating water, cooking, and travelling” (p. 33). The two subsequent chapters drive the point further home by showing how natural selection shaped human genes and minds to build and hone human social capacities in learning from others, as well as how cultural adaptations eventually led to the enduring gene-culture co-evolution.

Chapter 6 similarly exemplifies and accentuates how cultural evolution can change the environment and, thereby, drive genetic evolution. In chapter 7, entitled “On the Origin of Faith”, Henrich underlines how natural selection favours groups and individuals who put great trust in cultural inheritance and thereby diminish the threat of being misled by over-reliance on one’s own intuitions and personal experiences. This point is developed further in chapter 8 with the rather enigmatic title “Prestige, Dominance,

and Menopause”, in which different patterns of conformity, imitation, and mimicry are deemed pivotal elements in driving both cultural evolution and the extension of post-reproductive life, with the elderly members of a community as repository of accumulated cultural knowledge. Chapter 9 discusses another important point related to religion (noticeably absent as a category in the book): taboos, kinship rules, and other social norms evoked by ritual. Chapter 10 focuses on intergroup competition as a driver in cultural evolution, whereas chapter 11 lays stress on the ability of humans to exert self-domestication, both collectively and individually.

In the wake of a basic Durkheimian tenet, Henrich in chapter 12 speaks about “Our Collective Brains” referring to the power inherent in the group’s collective ability to develop increasingly advanced forms of technology by means of a co-evolution of technology and sociality. Chapter 13 highlights the question of the emergence of language, an event often labelled as the cultural equivalent of crossing the Rubicon. While not denying its importance, Henrich argues that cultural transmission and evolution are possible without language. He emphasizes how language itself, as a cultural product, cannot explain the emergence of culture. Finally, and as it has been particularly highlighted by Roy Rappaport (strangely absent in the book), language is susceptible to a number of vices, such as lying, which make it less likely to have played the decisive role in the emergence of culture (Rappaport 1999). Chapter 14 discusses the biological levels detached from genes at which culture exerts influence, while chapter 15 dates the cultural Rubicon to the time of *Homo erectus*, 1.8 million years ago, when cumulative culture increasingly came to exert influence on hominin evolution. Notable changes in feet, legs, guts, teeth, and brains testify to this period as a fundamental transitional phase.

The remaining chapters elaborate this point by underlining how human predecessors’ taking leave of arboreal habitation, and entering into terrestrial areas, were forced to enhance the level of cooperation to survive, thereby simultaneously pushing and prompting their need for culture (chapter 16). The concluding chapter 17 hammers the point home by emphatically repeating the unique human gene-culture co-evolution.

I am full of praise for this stimulating book, but there are three critical points with which I have to dissent. It may be difficult in a book devoted to the discussion of *The Secret of Our Success* to pay due heed to continuity with our closest primate relatives, but at times I think Henrich overplays his case. Not only is it a biological premise to think nature in terms of continuity (this also relates to humans’ relationship with other species) but there is also, on almost a weekly basis, new ethological and primatological evidence which diminishes the alleged Rubicon of human uniqueness (see

in particular, de Waal's most recent book [2016] and, for that sake, Emery 2016). In my view Henrich makes the divide between humans and other animals too great.

There is a noticeable lack of focus on the human emotional system in Henrich's argument. This is odd, since other theoreticians (e.g. Jonathan Turner) have emphasized the highly complex emotional system of humans as crucial for the development of those traits which Henrich also deems central to specific hominin evolution (e.g. Turner 2007). It would have been advantageous if he had given more attention to this aspect as decisive for the human capability for culture and sociality.

The introductory eulogy aside, I have a general lament regarding the writing style. For a European readership, the numerous direct addresses and energetic questions meant to evoke the reader's prejudices and doubts (e.g. "[p]erhaps you are skeptical about this last point?," p. 1) in the long run become tiresome and condescending. Undoubtedly, they are meant to signal enthusiasm and fervour; but to me they convey the impression of an author who thinks of his readers as naïve and imprudent. Style is indeed a matter of personal predilection and may also relate to the different academic writing habits of two continents; however I cannot help but express a certain antipathy to this over-excited and popular style which ultimately becomes a form of clasp the reader.

These critical points aside, I want to conclude this review by accentuating the scholarly value of the book which is a must for anyone interested in cultural evolution, evolutionary biology, moral psychology, and the study of religion.

References

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