War of the sexes: economics, evolution and how to give everyone an equal slice of the pie

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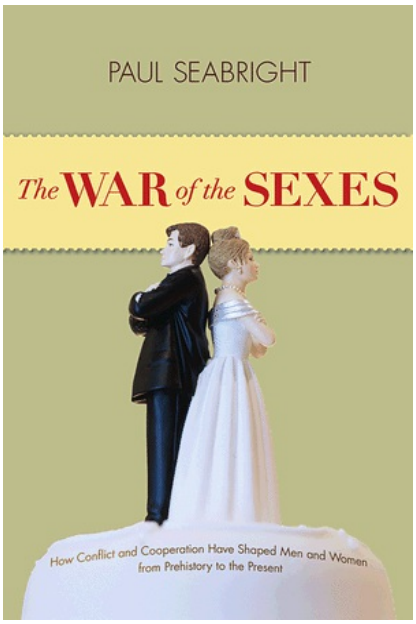
We might not all agree with some of Seabright's theories on the source of economic inequality between men and women, but is ***War of the Sexes*** *a challenging and interesting read? Undoubtedly so, says* ***Sander Van Der Linden.***

The War of the Sexes. Paul Seabright. Princeton University Press. April 2012.



The first thing that came to my mind while I was holding Paul Seabright's new book; 'the war of the sexes' was; this is either going to be an incredibly interesting book, illuminating some of the big questions about the ever recurring differences in male and female behaviour, or, this book is going down the same crapshoot as a large chunk of other popular science publications that have been written on the subject in the last 20 years. Right off the bat, I can say that this book should not be collecting dust on your shelf.

The book itself is divided into two main parts; the first four chapters are dedicated to our evolutionary past, and seek to unravel the forces that drive conflict and cooperation between the sexes by delving into our biological nature and looking at evidence from ancestral environments. The second part of the book attempts to explain gender inequality (most notably, economic inequality) at present.

The main point that is conveyed in the first part of the book is that one of the evolutionary consequences of humans acquiring large prefrontal brain structures (that what separates us from other primates) is that humans must be born prematurely. A direct implication of this is a prolonged infant dependency, in fact, the longest out of all species. The comparative helplessness of human infants therefore necessitates a very intensive maternal or parental investment, which essentially forms the beginning of a (cooperative) 'social contract' between men and women.

The other key take-away is that the cost and benefits associated with such a contract are fundamentally different for men and women. In a world without contraception, women naturally had to be extremely selective about whom to mate with while men needed be to extremely

persistent, leading them to find other means of establishing a 'comparative advantage'. This natural tension has created a setting where each party tries to bargain and market themselves as the most attractive and desirable option available (i.e. in terms of fitness).

While some of us may spend a lot of time dreaming about knights in shining armour (or equivalent fantasies such as Princess Leia), Seabright's explanation undoubtedly de-romanticizes the very nature of male-female relationships, but at the same time does give credence to a more accurate understanding of the forces that have shaped our preferences as well as our natural potential for conflict and cooperation. A drawback is that Seabright does not pay much attention to all the interesting publications that exist on the implications of feelings of 'love' for long-term cooperation as well as the behavioural factors that make certain couples stay together for a lifetime, long after their children have matured (i.e. where continued cooperation is still potentially valuable, but arguably less obvious). Nonetheless, the first part of the book gives a surprisingly decent account of our evolutionary roots and is full of interesting and amusing examples from the animal kingdom.

The reader might be somewhat disappointed by the second part of the book, considering the relative lack of integration with the first part of the story. Other than some broad strokes, the second part mainly consists of rather speculative (but certainly interesting) theories proposed by Seabright that attempt to explain some of the current economic inequalities between men and women. It should be noted of course that the difficulty here is that the environment in which humans operate has changed tremendously: life satisfaction is more than just reproduction, the introduction of contraception, as well as the rise of the information age, have vastly changed the way we interact with each other and so it remains difficult, for anyone, to explain how our biological past is responsible for today's inequalities.

Nevertheless, the reader might appreciate how Seabright seeks to invalidate some popular (fallacious) theories about the source of inequality between men and women (e.g. such as differences in intelligence or ability). But while Seabright spends a lot of time discussing the ins and outs of the econometrics behind certain studies, taking into account research from other disciplines would perhaps have been more illuminating. For example, there is lots of neurological evidence available on the difference in brain structures between men and women that has long, convincingly addressed these myths.

Seabright goes on to propose that at present, there are two interrelated, promising explanations for labour and income inequality between the sexes. The first one is based on asymmetric preferences between men and women. For example, women might simply prefer not to work certain jobs or prefer to have / raise children over a fast-track career. Seabright argues that such differences in preferences can be costly. One reason is that due to fast evolving (work) environments women appear to pay a large price for opting to take career breaks and overall, it seems that working less (hours), disproportionally affects women. The second explanation has to

do with differences in networking strategies, where men seem to benefit more than women from their social networks (i.e. professionally). These two explanations are related in the sense that due to social conventions, men tend to pursue a less diverse set of goals which makes it easier for them to signal their talents and motivations to potential employers.

In addition, men tend to network with other men and with men having a bigger share of the pie, this would perpetuate a type of closed network that disproportionally benefits males in the workforce. Yet, while certainly insightful, due to the type of data available, most of the theories proposed are speculative at best and hence much of the evidence provided can hardly be considered causal in nature. This does however, not prevent Seabright from proposing some suggestions for public policy, such as mandating equal paternity leave for both men and women as a means of tackling gender inequality.

Seabright ends with a rather amusing quote that captures the spirit of the book; "Just as sex freed from economic dependence is better sex, economics freed from dependence on sex is likely to be better economics too". We might not all agree with some of Seabright's theories on the source of economic inequality between men and women, but is 'war of the sexes' a challenging and interesting read? Undoubtedly so.

Sander Van Der Linden is a doctoral researcher in social (experimental) psychology at LSE Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment. Sander's research is concerned with designing and evaluating behavioural interventions. He studies the psychological factors and conditions under which people are more likely to change their behaviour (i.e. in a more pro-social / pro-environmental manner). Part of his research also deals with theories of dual-processing in the brain. He is particularly interested in how individuals process different types of stimuli (e.g. analytical versus experiential information) cognitively and emotionally, and how both processes interact and mediate onto behaviour. Read more reviews by Sander.

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