

# NEWS & COMMENT

## BIOLOGISM DAY SCHOOL

About 40 people attended the third RP day-school on sociobiology, which was held at Goldsmiths' College on Saturday 10 November. In the morning, Martin Barker gave an introduction to sociobiological theory, focussing especially on Richard Dawkins' book, The Selfish Gene, and this was followed by a general discussion. In the afternoon, we split into smaller groups, to look at particular popularizations of sociobiology with very clear political messages: a piece by Richard Verrall of the National Front, using sociobiology to support racism; another by Glen Wilson (of London University's Institute of Psychiatry) in She, entitled 'Why Can't a Woman be more like a Man?'; and one in the Daily Mail, claiming that Thatcherite capitalism had now been shown to be 'biologically valid'. Some of the issues that came up in the groups were then fed back into a general session, at the end of the afternoon.

In his opening talk, Martin emphasized the key theoretical disagreement between sociobiologists (such as Wilson, Dawkins, and Trivers) and their immediate predecessors as advocates of evolutionary explanations of human social behaviour, the ethologists (such as Lorenz, Morris, and Ardrey). Whereas human ethologists took the unit of selection to be the species, or populations of species, the sociobiologists take it to be the individual member of the species (or, more strictly, the individual gene). So, whilst ethologists could find a simple rationale for altruistic behaviour, as contributing to the species' survival, sociobiologists have instead to show how such behaviour could be part of the rational strategy of a 'selfish' gene, for its success in self-replication. Likewise, there are differences in the analysis of aggression, with ethologists claiming species-benefits for innate controls over its destructive consequences, and sociobiologists starting instead from the benefits to individuals of successful aggressive behaviour. Martin also argued that there were indeed connections between sociobiological theory and the support of specific political positions: racism, for instance, could be argued to from the tendency of individuals to be more aggressive to members of groups that are significantly less genetically related to them than are members of that individual's own society.

The discussions during the rest of the day raised a lot of different issues, with considerable disagreements on many of them. Some people thought it important to emphasize the differences between sociobiologists themselves, about how far the theory could be applied to human social behaviour. Thus Maynard Smith, despite having contributed a central theoretical component to sociobiology (the idea of an 'evolutionarily stable strategy') rejected almost any application to humans, whilst some American sociobiologists, such as Trivers, Hamilton, and Wilson, showed little such restraint. Dawkins, it seemed, came somewhere in the middle, insisting on the radical difference between human 'culture' and biological evolution, but then introducing, in the meme concept, a theory of cultural evolution based on a strongly Darwinian

analogy. Further, it was pointed out that throughout The Selfish Gene, whilst talking of non-human animals, he used parallels and analogies with humans, either explicitly, or implicitly via anthropomorphic descriptions of animals (and, even more problematically, of genes themselves).

So, many felt that the political popularizations of sociobiology were largely prefigured in the way he and other sociobiologists had presented the theory - for instance, with the use of terms such as 'hawks', 'doves', 'bourgeois', 'selfish', and suchlike. At the same time, these popularizations claimed the theory, in its fully-fledged application to humans, to be highly authoritative and proven 'science'. But there were a lot of different responses to this at the day-school. Some regarded any claim to scientific status, as contrasted with 'ideology', as itself ideological; others, that one could fairly straightforwardly show that Dawkins's arguments for the theory failed to meet normal scientific requirements - for instance only evidence that 'fitted' was ever mentioned and no attempt was made to show how sociobiology explained even these phenomena better than alternative explanations. An additional complexity here was the suggestion made that all evolutionary explanations have a strong tendency to tautology: what now exists must be 'beneficial' since it's what has survived, and with a little ingenuity almost anything can be suitably explained by applying the formula in a way that is almost impossible to check since hypothetical events in the very remote past are typically referred to.

On the question whether there are direct political implications of sociobiological theory opinions also differed. Sociobiologists themselves tended to invoke the fact-value dichotomy to defend themselves against such accusations; but even those of us who partly accept this dichotomy have to deal with the obvious implications of 'hard-line' sociobiologists who claim that certain features of human behaviour are unalterable or inevitable. Some argued that providing that some 'autonomy' was left to 'human culture', sociobiologists could claim that they were merely identifying 'problems' due to 'human nature' which could be dealt with politically in many different ways (for instance the Daily Mail piece presented Conservatism as 'harnessing' the selfish and competitive nature of humans with appropriate institutions; presumably these themselves do not accord with this nature - yet this same piece presented sociobiology as proving that all human social behaviour is genetically determined!) Others argued that sociobiologists could give no coherent account of this 'autonomy of culture'; and that, in any case, the biology v. culture dichotomy was itself unacceptable.

Finally there was discussion of the general attitude towards forms of biologism that could or should be developed on the left. Some argued that it was pointless or even counter-productive to engage in the theoretical issues at all: for instance appropriate 'refutations' of biological determinism about sex roles could easily be provided by people

simply changing their own lives in ways the biological approach said was impossible. Others, by contrast, thought it would be valuable to follow on the discussions of sociobiology at the day-school by more detailed critical analyses of specific sociobiological attempts to explain certain areas of human behaviour, such as Wilson's explanation of homosexuality or Trivers' account of human kin altruism.

I found the day interesting and useful, and I got

the impression that many others did, though some felt that the discussions were not sufficiently concrete (i.e. addressed to the detail of socio-biological claims), and others that the issues were too abstract to derive any direct practical benefit from the day. Needless to say (as people say), I've left out a lot of points of view that were put because of my (unconsciously) selective memory.

Russell Keat

## THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCASHUN

Three years ago in the pages of this journal Michel Foucault declared that

A new mode of 'connection between theory and practice' has been established. Intellectuals have become accustomed to working not in the character of the 'universal', the 'exemplary', the 'just-and-true' for all, but in specific sectors, at precise points where they are situated either by professional conditions of work or their conditions of life. (1)

At the time that seemed a premature claim. As a teacher working in an inner London comprehensive school it seemed to me then that those who styled themselves as intellectuals within the educational world continued to cast themselves in the role of 'universal consciousness' rather than, as Foucault suggested, specific 'exchangers'. Foucault was, I felt, at least as far as the teaching profession was concerned, expressing a somewhat optimistic vision of the future rather than a considered view of the past.

I am not so sure now. For on 16 November 1979 twenty teachers, of whom I was one, came together for three days at Fircroft College, Birmingham, to discuss and prepare a report on the role of the teacher in research. We represented a wide variety of experience both in terms of the research projects with which we had been associated and of the posts that we had held in nursery, primary and secondary schools and colleges of education. All of us had been involved in some form of classroom research either as part of a curriculum development project, to fulfil the requirements of a higher degree, or simply out of a desire to learn more about our own classrooms; and all of us had now come together to

share our experience of classroom research and to define some of the key issues relating to our role within the research process.

The significance of this conference lay in the fact that it was planned, organised and coordinated by practising teachers and that an organisation as prestigious as the Schools Council should have felt it worthwhile to back a venture in which teachers were to make a considered statement on key questions relating to the relevance of educational research. The teachers who attended were intent upon forging a new mode of connection between theory and practice: alternative forms of research and of collaboration between teachers and professional researchers. The work of these teachers shows, I believe, that many of them are already pushing past the fixed forms and beginning to see through and beyond them the elements of new, dynamic formations. 'The mode of existence of the new intellectual', as Gramsci pointed out, 'must consist of being actively involved in practical life, as a builder, an organiser' (2).

The full report of the conference is available free of charge from the Schools Council. Anyone wishing to receive a copy should write to the Publications Department, Schools Council, 160 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6LL. Any other correspondence concerning the conference or possible outcomes should be addressed to me, Jon Nixon, the conference organiser, at Woodberry Down School, Woodberry Grove, London N4 2SH.

1 Foucault, Michel, The political function of the intellectual, p12, in *Radical Philosophy*, No. 17, Summer 1977, pp12-14.

2 Gramsci, Antonio, *The modern prince and other writings*, International Publishers, 1978 (7th printing), p122.

### BOOKS RECEIVED

K. O. Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* RKP, £12.50 hc.

A. Arato and P. Breines, *The Young Lukacs and the Origins of Western Marxism*, Pluto Press, £10 hc, £4.95 pb.

R. Bologh, *Dialectical Phenomenology: Marx's Method*, RKP, £12. hc.

A. Bozarth-Campbell, *The Word's Body*, University of Alabama Press, £9.30 hc.

M. Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks - early history of British film*, RKP, £12.50 hc.

R. Edwards, *Pleasures and Pains*, Cornell UP, £6 hc.

M. Foucault, *Power, Truth, Strategy*, Feral Publications (Sydney, Australia), no price.

B. Glassner, *Essential Interactionism: on the understanding of prejudice*, RKP, £7.95 hc

P. Hoch, *White Hero, Black Beast*, Pluto Press, £8.95 hc, £3.95 pb.

M. Markovic and G. Petrovic, *Paaxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, D. Reidel Pub. Co. \$55.30 hc, \$23.70 pb.

E. Nagel, *The Structure of Science*, RKP, £4.95 pb

H. Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, RKP, £2.95 pb.

D. Silverman and B. Torode, *The Material Word*, RKP, £9.50 hc.

D. Watson, *Caring for Strangers*, RKP, £7.50 hc, £3.75 pb.

M. Poster, *Sartre's Marxism*, Pluto Press, £2.50 pb.

R. Seaver (trans.), *Sartre, by himself*, Urizen Books (NY), £1.95 pb.