

Evolutionary Psychology and the Naturalization of Gender Inequalities

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Abstract

This article explores the uses of evolutionary psychology in a corpus of 29 articles published by the online magazine *Quillette*. We show that while they openly rely on a rationalist, descriptive stance, *Quillette* contributors actively promote a range of normative views on science and the social world, including gender inequalities, with the stated goal to question the so-called “left-wing” and “blank slate” orthodoxies. In so doing, this magazine participates to the development and diffusion of a conservative meritocratic frame that strongly resembles the self-legitimizing discourses put forth by socially dominant groups, only in a naturalized form.

Keywords: Evolutionary psychology, *Quillette*, naturalization, science, conservatism

Introduction

In recent years, social scientists from many countries around the globe (from Japan to Brazil, to France, Denmark and the United States) have experienced organizational and existential threats from conservative politicians (Andersen, 2022; Bourdieu et al., 2022; Kingston, 2015; Moody, 2024). While we may be accustomed to think of these threats as “external” to academia, the legitimacy of social science is also attacked, sometimes fiercely, from within the scientific field itself. Evolutionary psychologists and behaviour geneticists have thus been very vocal about their disapproval of “standard” social science for a few decades (Cassidy, 2006; Panofsky, 2014). While this critical stance is not new, it has recently found some

fresh and important relays in non-academic circles as well. *Quillette*, an online magazine established in 2015, is one of them: it articulates a critique of social science with a denunciation of the so-called “liberal bias” that is supposed to be prevalent in academia (Larregue, 2018). As explained by its founder Claire Lehmann, an Australian journalist with a degree in psychology, by “setting up a space where we could critique the blank slate orthodoxy,” *Quillette* “has naturally evolved into a place where people critique other aspects of what they see as left-wing orthodoxy” (Lester, 2018).

We are, of course, not the first to document the relationship between evolutionary ideas and conservative ideologies (Jackson and Rees, 2007;



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McKinnon, 2006; Meloni, 2016). Despite their overt criticism of religiosity and a secular reading of Darwinism (Shapin, 2010), Dorothy Nelkin (2010: 15) acutely observed that evolutionary psychologists exhibited a religious impulse, regularly embracing the role of “missionaries bringing truth to the unenlightened”, not least when “they claim their theories are guides to moral action and policy agendas”. In this article, we add to this literature by asking how evolutionary ideas are leveraged to promote certain views of the social world (be they scientific, political, moral, ethical, etc.) while criticizing what are branded as alternative narratives? More specifically, we focus on two interrelated aspects: a) how evolutionary psychology is promoted as a “good”, or even sometimes a “better” science, and thus offered as a complementary and/or alternative discourse to claims and interpretations attributed to “leftist” social scientists; b) how the evolutionary psychology scholarly corpus and evolutionary gaze is leveraged and used as a rhetorical resource in the practical discussion of social problems, including gender inequalities.

Before going further, let us emphasize that we are *not* arguing that all evolutionary psychologists share identical political views, nor that the scientific productions in this field are homogeneous and thus amenable to definitive conclusions. As demonstrated by previous research, the best definition for, and limits of evolutionary psychology are notoriously difficult to identify (Larregue et al., 2021; Cassidy, 2006: 186), and the aim of this article is not to propose an exhaustive inventory of the whole field of evolutionary psychology. What we do contend, however, is that evolutionary arguments are used by *Quillette* contributors to promote certain views of the social world, and that these views are not politically neutral.

Methods and data

To analyse this language and its various uses, we built a corpus of *Quillette* articles where evolutionary theory was central to the authors’ argument. We performed a search on www.quillette.com with the help of the built-in search tool, using the keywords “evolutionary psychology” (without quotation marks)¹. The search initially returned

152 items published between May 2015 and May 2021, most of them being articles, while just a few were reviews, editorials, etc. We then performed a filtering of the results, as some articles did not have any relationship with evolutionary theory. To do that, we read the articles and used a four-label classification system, each item receiving a number between 0 and 3 depending on the importance that evolutionary theory occupied in the text:

- Label 0: there is no reference whatsoever to evolutionary theory or only in the paratext. For example, when the word “evolutionary” appears in the biography of the author, or when the specialty of a professor of evolutionary psychology is mentioned in the text although (s)he is interviewed on a topic that is not related to evolutionary theory. 41 items were labelled 0.
- Label 1: evolutionary theory barely appears in the text or as a secondary argument. In this case, evolutionary psychology will seldom be mentioned (see for instance Winegard and Winegard, 2019) or only as a rapid argument (see for instance Miller, 2019). 52 items were labelled 1.
- Label 2: evolutionary theory is one of the arguments of the text but without being predominant. The importance of such an argument is assessed based on the position of the argument in the text and its recurrence. A typical example would be an article where evolutionary psychology is addressed in one or two paragraphs (see for instance Anomaly and Boutwell, 2017). 30 items were labelled 2.
- Label 3: evolutionary theory is either central in the argumentation, or even sometimes the core of the article. This would be the case of a paper advocating for the use of evolutionary theory in anthropology (see for instance Blackwell, 2018), or of an article entirely devoted to evolutionary psychology (see for instance Flock, 2018). 29 items were labelled 3.

Although it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between categories 1 and 2, the classification has been made so that this issue would not impact the identification of category 3: there is absolutely no doubt that these later articles involve evolu-

tionary theory as a central component. Another difficulty has been met when classifying articles dealing with broader biological arguments (such as behavioural genetics), without an explicit mention of evolutionary theory. Such articles would not be labelled 3 but at most 2, thus ensuring that the category of articles labelled 3 are directly dealing with evolutionary theory. To be clear, this does not mean that the expression “evolutionary psychology” appears in the text *per se* (it appears in 13 out of these 29 articles), but that an evolutionary approach to human behaviour is central to the arguments laid out in the article.

Our close reading of the 29 articles was geared toward the way evolutionary ideas are used to address questions relating to social inequalities, especially at the gender level. This close reading allowed us to identify and analyze the type of evolutionary arguments and ideas that *Quillette* contributors resort to in their discussion of social science and social inequalities. We were particularly attentive to 1) how what “is” becomes normalized and reconfigured as what “ought” to be, and 2) how evolutionary psychology was used to prognosticate the future, and reproduction of, social inequalities.

***Quillette*: “a platform for free thought”**

Quillette is an online magazine that was founded in October 2015 by Australian journalist Claire Lehmann. After graduating in psychology from the University of Adelaide in 2010, she initiated a move towards the journalistic field and started writing op-eds for several Australian journals such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *Rebel Australia*. She claims that she felt the need to create *Quillette* after feeling that she was blacklisted from Australian media because of her heterodox political views: “I particularly wanted to criticize feminism, and I couldn’t get published in the Australian media if I was critical of feminism... I was blacklisted.” (Lester, 2018).

From the beginning, the magazine designed an editorial line characterized by its scientific anchoring and free speech. It was thought of as a platform where authors – mostly academics – could write in an accessible way about human nature and its evolutionary roots, against standard

social science and their political allies: “*Quillette* is a platform for free thought. We respect ideas, even dangerous ones. We also believe that free expression and the free exchange of ideas help human societies flourish and progress. *Quillette* aims to provide a platform for this exchange.”² The magazine, sitting at the margin of academia, thus appears as a buffer zone where academic and non-academic alike can develop a shared language. Like Thomas Medvetz’s (2014: 294) depiction of conservative think tanks, *Quillette* is “neither purely academic nor anti-academic”, but a “constitutively hybrid [creature] that [functions] by assembling mixed bundles of institutionalized resources.”

The scientific and political orientation of *Quillette* is not left to chance. Half of the articles proposed by the magazine are commissioned – and retributed 400 Australian dollars (Lester, 2018) – the other half being selected among voluntary submissions. One of the first contributors included Brian Boutwell, a US-based criminologist who has been instrumental in the contemporary renewal of biological theories of crime (Larregue, 2024: 83), and who actively collaborates with self-proclaimed “conservative criminologists” John Paul Wright and Matt DeLisi (2015). Since then, the contributions have often offered a conservative or libertarian viewpoint on various aspects of the so-called ‘free speech wars’ (Riley, 2020).

After a timorous commencement, the notoriety of the website skyrocketed when, in the summer of 2017, *Quillette* published an article grounded on evolutionary theory (*Quillette Magazine*, 2017) to defend engineer James Damore, the author of the infamous *Google* memo that proposed to explain unequal professional achievements between men and women by biological factors. While this intervention alone cannot explain *Quillette*’s growing visibility, it is clear from the number of *Twitter* followers of the magazine that it constituted a stepping stone: in March 2017, *Quillette*’s *Twitter* account had 6,932 followers; in September 2017, it reached approximately 15,500. It then continued to grow exponentially: in January 2019, 121,000 accounts were following *Quillette*; in August 2021, it had more than 215,300 followers.³

As it became a prominent outlet, *Quillette* also expanded its editorial team as of summer

of 2021. Apart from Claire Lehmann, there are now three other paid editors, coming either from the journalistic field, the cultural field or from the scientific field, each representing a different English-speaking country: Jonathan Kay, a former tax lawyer, who has been a journalist in Canada since the late 1990s; Jamie Palmer, a former documentary film-maker who graduated from Dublin Institute of Technology; Colin Wright, who obtained a PhD in evolutionary biology from the University of California Santa Barbara in 2018. The influence of *Quillette* is, however, not restricted to these countries. In France for instance, articles published in the magazine have begun to be translated and published in *Le Point*, a weekly magazine standing at the right of the political spectrum.

Disguised as science? The evolutionary critique of “standard social science”

Before delving further into the uses of evolutionary psychology in *Quillette*, it is important to provide some context on the development of this field as well as on its positioning vis-à-vis the rest of the social sciences. In this section, we investigate evolutionary psychologists’ boundary-work vis-à-vis what they call “standard social science,” that is the way key representatives of this movement attempt to “[construct] a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as ‘non-science’” (Gieryn, 1983: 782).

From the late 1980s on, many evolutionary psychologists – including representatives of the so-called Santa Barbara school – presented their field as a reaction to social science, which was deemed immature, pseudoscientific, and intellectually bankrupt (Cassidy, 2006). According to an oft-heard narrative, the only way to break out of this alleged isolationism and anti-scientific positions would be to embrace adaptationist views of human behaviour (Larregue et al., 2021). *Quillette* can in this regard be analysed as the logical continuation of a rhetorical strategy that crystallized in the early 1990s, when the movement of evolutionary psychology gradually became identifiable through the boundary-work that its main proponents exerted on two fronts: vis-à-vis previous evolutionary understandings

of human behaviour, including sociobiology, but also with respect to non-evolutionary social science (Larregue et al., 2021; Cassidy, 2006). When it comes to the latter, such boundary-work has notably materialized in the adoption of pejorative labels supposed to convey the irreducible limitations of “traditional” sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Two expressions, in particular, have been instrumental in evolutionary psychologists’ boundary-work, becoming a rallying sign for like-minded scholars who wished to break away from what they perceived as ideologically oriented research.

The first one, ‘Standard Social Science Model’, was coined by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (1992) in a 118-page programmatic essay published in a collective, foundational book from the early 1990s (Barkow et al., 1992). Superficially referring to Durkheim’s *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (among other classical landmarks), Tooby and Cosmides go on to argue that the social sciences have promoted a culturalist view of human behaviour that denies any explanatory role to biology, which resulted in theoretical isolationism. To be clear, any historian of the social sciences will realize that this narrative is factually incorrect. For instance, in his classic *Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1984: 21) explicitly lends support to the hypothesis of brain differences between men and women. Prominent representatives of the Chicago school were also actively promoting eugenicist ideas in the early 20th century. In fact, when Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) edited and published *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, the “first highly visible textbook of American sociology” (Morris, 2017: 19), they decided to reprint one of Galton’s writings (“Eugenics as a Science of Progress”).

Despite this unambiguous evidence, evolutionary psychologists generally prefer to assume that social scientists have rejected “biology” to embrace extremist views of human nature. This, in turn, is said to have caused their stagnation since the beginning of the 20th century:

After more than a century, the social sciences are still adrift, with an enormous mass of half-digested observations, a not inconsiderable body of empirical generalizations, and a contradictory stew of ungrounded, middle-level theories expressed in

a babel of incommensurate technical lexicons. [...] We suggest that this lack of progress, this 'failure to thrive,' has been caused by the failure of the social sciences to explore or accept their logical connections to the rest of the body of science – that is, to causally locate their objects of study inside the larger network of scientific knowledge. (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 23)

As summarized by Angela Cassidy (2006: 193), "What emerges from [this] piece is less of an attack upon all social science per se, than a critique of interpretive and qualitative approaches to social and psychological research." As this critique was further developed and extended across the years, it also gained traction in the public sphere. Hence, ten years after Tooby's and Cosmides' academic chapter, psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker (2002) follows up with the critique of social science that he had already initiated in previous publications (Cassidy, 2005: 127–130) by publishing a highly influential essay that would be a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize: *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. The blank slate metaphor refers to theories of mind postulating that individuals are born without integrated mental content, and therefore that all human knowledge or behavior comes from the experience or from learning. In his eponymous essay, Pinker follows the path opened by Tooby and Cosmides, accusing social sciences of denying the possibility of behavioral innatism. But while Tooby and Cosmides (1992: 49) barely touched upon politics and designed their intervention as purely academic, Pinker widens the frame and clears the path for a different sort of examination: by connecting the critique of social science to the critique of political 'egalitarianism' (Pinker, 2002: 22), scientists, activists and politicians alike are brought together under the banner of a shared 'sacred scripture' (Pinker, 2002: 6).

Quillette's recuperation of the blank slatist rhetoric

This weaving is now furthered through *Quillette's* editorial line, which largely pursues Pinker's effort in widening the evolutionary authorship and readership. A close analysis of our corpus of 29 articles demonstrates that the blank slate expres-

sion became a convenient label for attacking both social scientists and left-leaning ideologies: we were able to identify 18 occurrences of "blank slate" and derivative expressions such as "blank-slatism" (Willoughby, 2017) and "blank slater" (Chipkin, 2019). Conversely, the expression "Standard Social Science Model" could not be found, which testifies to the structuring importance of Pinker's book. It is evolutionary psychologists' position that "blank-slatism" is a marker of irrational and unscientific ideology, which leads some *Quillette* authors to compare social science with "anti-vaccine rhetoric", "climate change denial" and "creationist Christians" (Willoughby, 2017). Likewise, Colin Wright (2018), an evolutionary biologist (now a managing editor at *Quillette*) who specialized in the "social behavior of ant, wasp and spider societies", goes on to argue that

the social justice stance on human evolution closely resembles that of the Catholic Church. The Catholic view of evolution generally accepts biological evolution for all organisms, yet holds that the human soul (however defined) had been specially created and thus has no evolutionary precursor. Similarly, the social justice view has no problem with evolutionary explanations for shaping the bodies and minds of all organisms both between and within a species regarding sex, yet insists that humans are special in that evolution has played no role in shaping observed sex-linked behavioral differences. (Wright, 2018)

These comparisons are suggestive of the uses of evolutionary theory in *Quillette*. The same way that "Darwin Day⁴ is less about a historical figure than an occasion for extending versions of scientific materialism and rationalism to ever new cultural domains" (Shapin, 2010), accusations of "blank slatism" are less about scientifically discussing the theoretical inscription of contemporary social sciences than an occasion for extending the evolutionary dominion and, through it, a particular conception of humans. Sociology stands as one of the favourite targets for this somewhat aggressive boundary-work: the word "sociology" and its derivatives appear 58 times in the corpus.

The most representative article of this production is authored by Brian Boutwell (2017), a biosocial criminologist mentioned earlier. In an

article transparently titled *Sociology's Stagnation*, Boutwell claims that sociology's alleged denial of genetic influence on behaviours makes it no different than religion. According to him, sociology is characterized by a hermeticism to biology and psychology, which is due to the maintenance of "sacred values" upon which the field was built. Hence, the best that can happen to this "intellectually bankrupt" discipline is to turn its head toward the biological enlightenment brought about by "population genetics, psychology, epidemiology, and evolutionary biology" (Boutwell, 2017).

From "inequalities" to "differences": normalizing gender inequalities in science

Explaining social inequalities by turning them into *biological* inequalities is instrumental in the formation of *Quillette's* evolutionary discourse. More than class inequalities, gendered disparities in the distribution of economic capital (Bessi re and Gollac, 2020) are the primary focus of evolutionary psychological writings. In this section, we shall expose the back-and-forth movements between evolutionary psychology as a science and evolutionary psychology as a sociodicy⁵ that legitimates inequalities between binary, reified groups (men and women).

To understand evolutionary psychologists' views on the topic, it must be stressed that scholars in this area consider that since differential gene reproduction from one generation to another is the evolutionary process that is most subjected to natural selection, the psychological mechanisms pertaining to mating and reproductive behaviours must also be strong targets of selection. It thus comes as no surprise that evolutionary psychologists consider most courtship, mating and parenting gender specific behaviours as evolutionary strategies originating in biological factors (Buss, 2019). However, what is of particular interest for us is that they also extend the scope of this explanation to many, if not most gendered differences in behaviour, with the consequence that "[t]he entirety of human social life is made reducible to the heterosexual, reproductive imperative" (Jackson and Rees, 2007: 918). This can be illustrated by an article written by a then

predoctoral researcher in neuroscience. In *Why Feminists Must Understand Evolution*, Marta Iglesias (2017) outlines a causal pathway that begins with the differing degree of investment in reproduction between men and women, to the contrasted nature of sexual competition between the sexes, to end up with the explanation of cultural practices:

These differences [in reproduction and sexual competition] manifest as the differences we observe in our daily lives: from the toys we prefer when we are small to the products we consume when we are adults; from the tendency to be the object of bullying or its perpetrator to the likelihood of causing a traffic accident; from the posture we adopt when we sit in the underground to the importance we attach to career status. (Iglesias, 2017)

This quote illustrates how evolutionary psychology can be used to naturalize differences that most social scientists would attribute to different upbringing and social dynamics. Another common example of this approach lies in the different prevalence of violent behaviours among men and women, which are attributed to evolutionary forces (Buckner, 2018). Of course, it does not necessarily follow from such hypotheses that gendered behavioural differences, although biologically "normal," cannot be altered through policy efforts, which is made perfectly clear in these two articles. For instance, Buckner (2018) argues that while "homicide and warfare are very much 'natural' behaviors, often tied to male fitness interests," they still are "sensitive to socioecological cues, and their prevalence can vary significantly across and within societies." Yet, while endeavouring to establish a common ground where nature and culture could meet and mesh, it remains that "Such accounts locate gender and sexuality firmly in the realm of the natural sciences and sideline the social and the cultural as mere modifiers of innate proclivities" (Jackson and Rees, 2007: 918)

Some authors go further than merely sidelining social processes, however, using evolutionary arguments to legitimate unequal attainments between social groups by insisting on their naturalness, durability, and inevitability. A particular example of such a propensity is the analysis of

the discrepancy of involvement in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) between men and women. This question has been strongly echoed in the past years in academia but also in the public sphere, for instance when James Damore – then a *Google* engineer – questioned the extent to which observed gender disparities in STEM were a product of workplace discrimination, and instead resorted to explanations derived from biology (Little and Winch, 2020). A typical evolutionary psychology approach on this topic is to put forward the fact that such disparities can be explained by gender differences at the level of preferences, aptitudes, and within-sex variability and “that these sex differences are not due solely or primarily to learning, socialization, or culture. Biology matters as well” (Stewart-Williams and Halsey, 2021: 4). Reacting to the *Google* controversy, evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller would write for *Quillette* that Damore’s memo “is consistent with the scientific state of the art on sex differences,” adding: “[b]lank slate gender feminism is advocacy rather than science” (Miller, in *Quillette Magazine*, 2017).

Evolutionary psychologists emphasize that men and women differ in their choice of career and vocational preferences, and that they also exhibit variable aptitudes when it comes to abstraction and other cognitive skills. A dichotomy that is widely used in social psychological research to describe occupational interests is the *people vs things* divide: the *people* category encompasses living entities, feelings, nursing, sociality etc., while the *things* category encompasses technical and symbolic manipulation, machines, abstract rules, and so on (Lippa, 1998; Su and Rounds, 2015). According to this stream of research, men are tilting towards career and occupations involving the *things* side of the continuum, while women are concentrated on the opposite *people* side. This would partly explain why women favour “people related” curricula such as psychology, social science, and health, over “things related” ones, including STEM. Although the scientific relevance of the people-things dichotomy remains disputed (Thelwall et al., 2019; Yang and Barth, 2015), it is now well established that there are gender differences in disciplinary and scientific interests (England and Li, 2006; Key and Sumner, 2019;

Nielsen and Börjeson, 2019). The question, then, is to know why.

Here, evolutionary psychologists diverge from social scientific explanations in two important ways. First, they hypothesize that such statistical divide between the two groups is rooted in evolutionary history of the human species: women would have evolved a stronger attentiveness to the needs of the young, and to people in general, because of their reproductive and nursing role. Drawing parallels between animals and humans, Marta Iglesias’ (2017) article on feminism and evolution is thus illustrated with the picture of a “[f]emale baboon nursing her offspring.” This evolutionary past would not only have repercussions on occupational preferences, but also on gender roles, so that women may often choose parenting over their career, because investing into the offspring would follow an unconscious evolutionary rationale. Second, evolutionary psychologists tend to disregard the fact that gendered preferences are attached to social hierarchies (be they symbolic, economic, or cultural), which inevitably leads to the “devaluation of ‘female’ activities” (England, 2010: 151). In contrast to this constant finding, some *Quillette* authors argue that male activities tend to be “more unpleasant, dangerous and demanding” (Brown, 2019).

Hence, although evolutionary psychologists do not completely deny that social factors hinder women involvement in STEM, they practically mitigate their influence in favour of an evolutionary storytelling. This is particularly noticeable in a *Quillette* article by David C. Geary, professor of psychology at the University of Missouri, and promoter of the *gender-equality paradox* (Stoet and Geary, 2018), which contends that in “more gender egalitarian countries”, there are more discrepancies between men and women within curriculum achievements and involvement in STEM careers, compared to “less gender egalitarian countries” (Stoet and Geary, 2018). Although the existence of this paradox remains disputed (Richardson et al., 2020; Stoet and Geary, 2020), Geary argues in his *Quillette* piece entitled *Sex Differences in Occupational Attainment are Here to Stay* (Geary, 2020) that men have a particular incentive for striving to achieve professionally. Indeed, a well-known hypothesis in evolutionary

psychology is that social status and some degree of accomplishment in culturally important domains correlates with reproductive success in males (because of greater resource control, better protection, etc.). It logically follows that getting involved in high-demanding fields such as STEM would provide social recognition for men, so that their presence in such fields would be the manifestation, in our current modern world, of an inherited evolutionary strategy. The result is that unequal academic achievements between men and women are rendered normal, legitimate and, finally, inevitable:

In any case, these broad patterns and the sex difference in occupational attainment persist, despite much money and time devoted to eliminating them. From an evolutionary perspective, the sex differences in work-life trade-offs and in career outcomes follow seamlessly from the historical pressures on men to achieve some level of cultural success, as well as women's greater investment in children. As long as men and women have some control over their work-life choices, reams of policy edicts, labor laws, and other forms of social engineering will not change the sex differences described by Hakim and many others (Geary, 2020).

The narrative behind the explanation of the discrepancies between men's and women's involvement in STEM thus goes down to invoking gendered behavioural traits that were allegedly selected during the Pleistocene epoch. Evolutionary psychologists contend that men's and women's career choices are often – and predominantly – influenced by unconscious evolutionary strategies. Still, they might “still be happy with their lives”, with the consequence that “policies that artificially engineer gender parity – financial incentives and quotas, for instance – could potentially lower aggregate happiness” (Stewart-Williams and Halsey, 2021: 24).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we tried to shed light on the uses of evolutionary psychology in the online magazine *Quillette*, a visible outlet that purports to offer “a platform for free thought”. Our analyses focused on two interrelated aspects: a) how evolution-

ary psychology is both the object and subject of a boundary-work aimed at criticizing traditional social science by presenting this field as ideologically driven and unduly condemning of biological understandings of human behaviour; b) how evolutionary psychology is instrumentalized to normalize and sometimes legitimate unequal professional attainments between men and women, thus transmuting “inequalities” into “differences”.

Our findings show that the critique of social science on the one hand, and the promotion of naturalistic views on gender inequalities on the other, cannot be fully separated. Since the 1990s, evolutionary psychologists have tried to depict social scientific research as ideologically driven and unscientific, in what can certainly be regarded as a classic case of boundary-work (Cassidy, 2006). Yet, they also do more than just competing for scientific recognition. *Quillette* articles are part of a larger effort to promote naturalistic ideas about human behaviour in the public sphere, with gender as a prime target. As we tried to show, one significant consequence of the uses of evolutionary psychology by *Quillette* authors is to offer a justificatory matrix for observed inequalities between dominant and dominated social groups. A specific ‘sociodicy’ ensues from this stance, with evolutionary psychologists interrogating “the causes of, and rationales for, social injustices and privileges” (Bourdieu, 1971: 312; see also Atkinson, 2021: 992). Whilst some of them insist that “a *description* of human nature is not a *prescription* for modern-day behaviour” (Flock, 2018), we also saw that it is not uncommon for evolutionary writers to transform an “is” into an “ought”. This symbolic legitimization that purports to rely on science comes as a handy complement to higher social classes’ justificatory narratives of their own success and others’ failures (Khan, 2011; Littler, 2017). Usually, dominant groups “underscore their talent, vision or work ethic, and deny or downplay social advantages – in a nutshell, they ascribe their position largely to *merit*, which necessarily means defining those in lower positions as having *less merit*” (Atkinson, 2021: 992; see also Rivera, 2015). One important corollary of this meritocratic perspective is that “the aristocratic marks of class, exclusion, and inheritance have been rejected” (Khan, 2011: 196).

This is where the analysis of evolutionary psychologists' sociodicy is particularly noteworthy. While subscribing to the broad principles of meritocracy, for instance through their attachment to "equality of opportunities" (Stewart-Williams and Halsey, 2021: 15), *Quillette* contributors also adhere to a strict categorization of the sexes that is correlated, according to them, to population difference in interests and variability in cognitive *abilities*. Thus, it becomes perfectly normal that equality of opportunities does not necessarily "translate into equality of outcomes" (Stewart-Williams and Halsey, 2021: 15; see also *Quillette Magazine*, 2017), a distinction that is reminiscent of sociologist and conservative-leaning thinker Daniel Bell (Littler, 2017: 87).

The meritocratic framework is thus somewhat nuanced through the introduction of a group-level variable that is independent and separable from the institutional arrangements of the educational system (among other institutions of legitimacy), leading to a peculiar form of biological aristocracy that functions as a gendered marker of social worth. The 'intergenerational self' of privileged people (Friedman et al., 2021) partly becomes biological. This is how evolutionary psychologists transform inequalities into differences: by "making differences in outcomes appear a product of who people are rather than a product of the conditions of their making" (Khan, 2011: 9), *Quillette* authors contribute to the elaboration and diffusion of a naturalized meritocratic narrative rooted in an inescapable evolutionary past.

We know that references to biological knowledge have become important for expressing social revendications and alimending

ongoing political debates, both on progressive and conservative sides (Grossi, 2020; Panofsky and Donovan, 2019). Normative views about the social world are presented as stemming from science, which favours their public diffusion even though they are sometimes not completely consensual within the scientific field. The proximity between evolutionary writings in *Quillette* and conservative ideas is particularly noteworthy because public representatives of evolutionary psychology used to "distance [themselves] from conservative politics" (Cassidy, 2006: 196), in particular through association with leftist political groups both from the US and the UK in the 1990s.

To be sure, this does not mean that evolutionary psychologists suddenly shifted from the left to the right of the political spectrum. In fact, existing surveys would tend to show that graduate students in evolutionary psychology and anthropology hold typical liberal views and are in this regard no different than their peers who are attached to a different theoretical framework (Lyle and Smith, 2012; Tybur et al., 2007). What it does demonstrate, however, is that scientific theories relying on a biological foundation are politically flexible and amenable to varied ideological shaping (Meloni, 2016). In this regard, *Quillette* participates in blurring the distinction between evolutionary theory as a heterogeneous scientific field, and evolutionary theory as a cultural product that can also be used as a means of developing, promoting, and legitimizing political views (Jackson and Rees, 2007). By publishing academically fashioned contributions written by evolutionary psychologists, it contributes to amalgamate the latter with the former.

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Notes

- 1 The research was done on June 8th, 2021.
- 2 <https://quillette.com/about/> (accessed 21 August 2021).
- 3 These numbers were obtained with the help of *Wayback Machine*. Please note that the *Quillette Twitter* username changed in January 2019, from *@QuilletteM* to *@Quillette* (previously taken).
- 4 Darwin Day is an international day of celebration held annually on February 12th, which coincides with Charles Darwin's birthday in 1809. It is meant to pay tribute to the life and discoveries of Charles Darwin and, more generally, to promote science and scientific reasoning in society.
- 5 The word 'sociodicy' was coined by Bourdieu (1971) to describe the narratives and argumentative strategies developed by the dominant classes to justify their advantageous positions within the social world.