

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature

By Steven Pinker

Other than the gender gap, the most combustible recent issue surrounding the sexes has been the nature and causes of rape. When the biologist Randy Thornhill and the anthropologist Craig Palmer published *A Natural History of Rape* in 2000, they threatened a consensus that had held firm in intellectual life for a quarter of a century, and they brought down more condemnation on evolutionary psychology than any issue had in years. Rape is a painful issue to write about, but also an unavoidable one. Nowhere else in modern intellectual life is the denial of human nature more passionately insisted upon, and nowhere else is the alternative more deeply misunderstood. Clarifying these issues, I believe, would go a long way toward reconciling three ideals that have needlessly been put into conflict: women's rights, a biologically informed understanding of human nature, and common sense.

The horror of rape gives it a special gravity in our understanding of the psychology of men and women. There is an overriding moral imperative in the study of rape: to reduce its occurrence. Any scientist who illuminates the causes of rape deserves our admiration, like a medical researcher who illuminates the cause of a disease, because understanding an affliction is the first step toward eliminating it. And since no one acquires the truth by divine revelation, we must also respect those who explore theories that may turn out to be incorrect. Moral criticism would seem to be in order only for those who would enforce dogmas, ignore evidence, or shut down research, because they would be protecting their reputations at the expense of victims of rapes that might not have occurred if we understood the phenomenon better.

Current sensibilities, unfortunately, are very different. In modern intellectual life the overriding moral imperative in analyzing rape is to proclaim that rape has nothing to do with sex. The mantra must be repeated whenever the subject comes up. "Rape is an abuse of power and control in which the rapist seeks to humiliate, shame, embarrass, degrade, and terrify the victim," the United Nations declared in 1993. "The primary objective is to exercise power and control over another person." This was echoed in a 2001 *Boston Globe* op-ed piece that said, "Rape is not about sex; it is about violence and sexual assault that are manifestations of the same powerful social forces: sexism and the glorification of violence. When an iconoclastic columnist wrote a dissenting article on rape and battering, a reader responded:

As a man who has been actively engaged for more than a decade as an educator and a counselor to help men to stop their violence against women, I find Cathy Young's Oct. 15 column disturbing and discouraging. She confuses issues by failing to acknowledge that men are socialized in a patriarchal culture that still supports their violence against women if they choose it.

So steeped in the prevailing ideology was this counselor that he didn't notice that Young was *arguing against* the dogma he took as self-evidently true, not "failing to acknowledge" it. And his wording—"men are socialized in a patriarchal culture"—reproduces a numbingly familiar slogan.

The official theory of rape originated in an important 1975 book, *Against Our Will*, by the gender feminist Susan Brownmiller. The book became an emblem of a revolution in our handling of rape that is one of second-wave feminism's greatest accomplishments. Until the 1970s, rape was often treated by the legal system and popular culture with scant attention to the interests of women. Victims had to prove they resisted their attackers to within an inch of their lives or else they were seen as having consented. Their style of dress was seen as a mitigating factor, as if men couldn't control themselves when an attractive woman walked by. Also mitigating was the woman's sexual history, as if choosing to have sex with one man on one

occasion were the same as agreeing to have sex with any man on any occasion. Standards of proof that were not required for other violent crimes, such as eyewitness corroboration, were imposed on charges of rape. Women's consent was often treated lightly in the popular media. It was not uncommon in movies for a reluctant woman to be handled roughly by a man and then melt into his arms. The suffering of rape victims was treated lightly as well; I remember teenage girls, in the wake of the sexual revolution in the early 1970s, joking to one another, "If a rape is inevitable, you might as well lie back and enjoy it." Marital rape was not a crime, date rape was not a concept, and rape during wartime was left out of the history books. These affronts to humanity are gone or on the wane in Western democracies, and feminism deserves credit for this moral advance.

But Brownmiller's theory went well beyond the moral principle that women have a right not to be sexually assaulted. It said that rape had nothing to do with an individual man's desire for sex but was a tactic by which the entire male gender oppressed the entire female gender. In her famous words:

Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistory times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function...it is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.

This grew into the modern catechism: rape is not about sex, our culture socializes men to rape, it glorifies violence against women. The analysis comes right out of the gender-feminist theory of human nature: people are blank slates (who must be trained or socialized to want things); the only significant human motive is power (so sexual desire is irrelevant); and all motives and interests must be located in groups (such as the male sex and the female sex) rather than in individual people.

The Brownmiller theory is appealing even to people who are not gender feminists because of the doctrine of the Noble Savage. Since the 1960s most educated people have come to believe that sex should be thought of as natural, not shameful or dirty. Sex is good because sex is natural and natural things are good. But rape is bad; therefore, rape is not about sex. The motive to rape must come from social institutions, not from anything in human nature.

The violence-not-sex slogan is right about two things. Both parts are absolutely true for the victim: a woman who is raped experiences it as a violent assault, not a sexual act. And the part about violence is true for the perpetrator by definition: if there is not violence or coercion, we do not call it rape. But the fact that rape has something to do with violence does not mean it has nothing to do with sex, any more than the fact that armed robbery has something to do with violence means it has nothing to do with greed. Evil men may use violence to get sex, just as they use violence to get other things they want.

I believe that the rape-is-not-about-sex doctrine will go down in history as an example of extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds. It is preposterous on the fact of it, does not deserve its sanctity, is contradicted by a mass of evidence, and is getting in the way of the only morally relevant goal surrounding rape, the effort to stamp it out.

Think about it. First obvious fact: Men often want to have sex with women who don't want to have sex with them. They use every tactic that one human being uses to affect the behavior of another: wooing, seducing, flattering, deceiving, sulking, and paying. Second obvious fact: Some men use violence to get what they want, indifferent to the suffering they cause. Men have been known to kidnap children for ransom (sometimes sending their parents an ear or finger to show they mean business), blind the victim of a mugging so the victim can't identify them in court, shoot out the kneecaps of an associate as punishment for ratting to the

police or invading their territory, and kill a stranger for his brand-name athletic footwear. It would be an extraordinary fact, contradicting everything else we know about people, if some men *didn't* use violence to get sex.

Let's also apply common sense to the doctrine that men rape to further the interests of their gender. A rapist always risks injury at the hands of the woman defending herself. In a traditional society, he risks torture, mutilation, and death at the hands of her relatives. In a modern society, he risks a long prison term. Are rapists really assuming these risks as an altruistic sacrifice to benefit the billions of strangers that make up the male gender? This becomes even less credible when we remember that rapists tend to be losers and nobodies, while presumably the main beneficiaries of the patriarchy are the rich and powerful. Men do sacrifice themselves for the greater good in wartime, of course, but they are either conscripted against their will or promised public adulation when their exploits are made public. But rapists usually commit their acts in private and try to keep them secret. And in most times and places, a man who rapes a woman in his community is treated as scum. The idea that all men are engaged in brutal warfare against all women clashes with the elementary fact that men have mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives, whom they care for more than they care for most other men. To put the same point in biological terms, every person's genes are carried in the bodies of other people, half of whom are of the opposite sex.

Yes, we must deplore the sometimes casual treatment of women's autonomy in popular culture. But can anyone believe that our culture literally "teaches men to rape" or "glorifies the rapist"? Even the callous treatment of rape victims in the judicial system of yesteryear has a simpler explanation than that all men benefit by rape. Until recently jurors in rape cases were given a warning from the seventeenth-century jurist Lord Matthew Hale that they should evaluate a woman's testimony with caution, because a rape charge is "easily made and difficult to defend against, even if the accused is innocent." The principle is consistent with the presumption of innocence built into our judicial system and with its preference to let ten guilty people go free rather than jail one innocent. Even so, let's suppose that the men who applied this policy to rape did tilt it toward their own collective interests. Let's suppose that they leaned on the scales of justice to minimize their own chances of ever being falsely accused of rape (or accused under ambiguous circumstances) and that they placed insufficient value on the injustice endured by women who would not see their assailants put behind bars. That would indeed be unjust, but it is still not the same things as *encouraging* rape as a conscious tactic to keep women down. If that were men's tactic, why would they have made rape a crime in the first place?

As for the morality of believing the not-sex theory, there is none. If we have to acknowledge that sexuality can be a source of conflict and not just wholesome mutual pleasure, we will have rediscovered a truth that observers of the human condition have noted throughout history. And if a man rapes for sex, that does not mean that he "just can't help it" or that we have to excuse him, any more than we have to excuse the man who shoots the owner of a liquor store to raid the cash register or who bashes a driver over the head to steal his BMW. The great contribution of feminism to the morality of rape is to put issues of *consent* and *coercion* at center stage. The ultimate motives of the rapist are irrelevant.

Finally, think about the humanity of the picture that the gender-feminist theory has painted. As the equity feminist Wendy McElroy points out, the theory holds that "even the most loving and gentle husband, father, and son is a beneficiary of the rape of women they love. No ideology that makes such vicious accusations against men as a class can heal any wounds. It can only provoke hostility in return."

Brownmiller asked a revealing rhetorical question:

Does one need scientific methodology in order to conclude that the anti-female propaganda that permeates our nation's cultural output promotes a climate in which acts of sexual hostility directed against women are not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged?

McElroy responded: "The answer is a clear and simple 'yes.' One needs scientific methodology to verify an empirical claim." And she called attention to the consequences of Brownmiller's attitude: "One of the casualties of the new dogma on rape has been research. It is no longer 'sexually correct' to conduct studies on the causes of rape, because – as any right-thinking person knows – there is only one cause: patriarchy. Decades ago, during the heyday of liberal feminism and sexual curiosity, the approach to research was more sophisticated." McElroy's suspicions are borne out by a survey of published "studies" of rape that found that fewer than one in ten tested hypotheses or used scientific methods.

Scientific research on rape and its connections to human nature was thrown into the spotlight in 2000 with the publication of *A Natural History of Rape*. Thornhill and Palmer began with a basic observation: a rape can result in a conception, which could propagate the genes of the rapist, including any genes that had made him likely to rape. Therefore, a male psychology that included a capacity to rape would not have been selected against, and could have been selected for. Thornhill and Palmer argued that rape is unlikely to be a *typical* mating strategy because of the risk of injury at the hands of the victim and her relatives and the risk of ostracism from the community. But it could be an *opportunistic* tactic, becoming more likely when the man is unable to win the consent of women, alienated from a community and thus undeterred by ostracism), and safe from detection and punishment (such as in wartime or pogroms). Thornhill and Palmer then outlined two theories. Opportunistic rape could be a Darwinian adaptation that was specifically selected for, as in certain insects that have an appendage with no function other than restraining a female during forced copulation. Or rape could be a by-product of two other features of the male mind: a desire for sex and a capacity to engage in opportunistic violence in pursuit of a goal. The two authors disagreed on which hypothesis was better supported by the data, and they left that issue unresolved.

No honest reader could conclude that the authors think rape is "natural" in the vernacular sense of being welcome or unavoidable. The first words of the book are, "As scientists who would like to see rape eradicated from human life. . .," which are certainly not the words of people who think it is inevitable. Thornhill and Palmer discuss the environmental circumstances that affect the likelihood of rape, and they offer suggestions on how to reduce it. The idea that most men have the capacity to rape works, if anything, in the interests of women, because it calls for vigilance against acquaintance rape, marital rape, and rape during societal breakdowns. Indeed, the analysis jibes with Brownmiller's own data that ordinary men, including "nice" American boys in Vietnam, may rape in wartime. For that matter, Thornhill and Palmer's hypothesis that rape is on a continuum with the rest of male sexuality makes them strange allies with the most radical gender feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who said that "seduction is often difficult to distinguish from rape. In seduction, the rapist often bothers to buy a bottle of wine."

Most important, the book focuses in equal part on the pain of the victims. (Its draft title was *Why Men Rape, Why Women Suffer*.) Thornhill and Palmer explain in Darwinian terms why females throughout the animal kingdom resist being forced into sex, and argue that the agony that rape victims feel is deeply rooted in women's nature. Rape subverts female choice, the core of the ubiquitous mechanism of sexual selection. By choosing the male and the circumstance for sex, a female can maximize the chances that her offspring will be fathered by a male with good

genes, a willingness and ability to share the responsibility of rearing the offspring, or both. As John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have put it, this ultimate (evolutionary) calculus explains why women evolved “to exert control over their own sexuality, over the terms of their relationships, and over the choice of which men are to be the fathers of their children.” They resist being raped, and they suffer when their resistance fails, because “control over their sexual choices and relationships was wrested from them.”

Thornhill and Palmer’s theory reinforces many points of an equity-feminist analysis. It predicts that from the woman’s point of view, rape, and consensual sex are completely different. It affirms that women’s repugnance toward rape is not a symptom of neurotic repression, nor is it a social construct that could easily be the reverse in a different culture. It predicts that the suffering caused by rape is deeper than the suffering caused by other physical traumas or body violations. That justifies our working harder to prevent rape, and punishing the perpetrators more severely, than we do for other kinds of assault. Compare this analysis with the dubious claim by two gender feminists that an aversion to rape has to be pounded into women by every social influence they can think of:

Female fear...[results] not only from women’s personal backgrounds but from what women as a group have imbibed from history, religion, culture, social institutions, and everyday social interactions. Learned early in life, female fear is continually reinforced by such social institutions as the school, the church, the law, and the press. Much is also learned from parents, siblings, teachers, and friends.

But despite the congeniality of their analysis to women’s interests, Thornhill and Palmer had broken a taboo, and the response was familiar: there were demonstrations, disruptions of lectures, and invective that would curdle your hair, as the popular malaprop has it. “Latest nauseating scientific theory” was a typical reaction, and radical scientists applied their usual standards of accuracy to denounce it. Hilary Rose, discussing a presentation of the theory by another biologist, wrote, “The sociobiologist David Barash’s appeal in defense of his misogynist claims that men are naturally predisposed to rape, ‘If nature is sexist don’t blame her sons,’ can no longer plug into the old deference to science as the view from nowhere.” Barash, of course, had said no such thing; he had referred to rapists as criminals who should be punished. The science writer Margaret Wetheim began her review of Thornhill and Palmer’s book by calling attention to a recent epidemic of rape in South Africa. Pitting the theory that rape is “a byproduct of social conditioning and chaos” against the theory that rape has evolutionary and genetic origins, she sarcastically wrote that if the latter were true, “South Africa must be a hothouse for such genes.” Two slurs for the price of one: the statement puts Thornhill and Palmer on the simplistic side of a false dichotomy (in fact, they devote many pages to the social conditions fostering rape) and slips in the innuendo that their theory is racist, too. The psychologist Geoffrey Miller, in his own mixed review of the book, diagnosed the popular reaction:

The Natural History of Rape has already suffered the worst possible fate for a popular science book. Like *The Descent of Man* and *The Bell Curve*, it has become an ideological touchstone. People who wish to demonstrate their sympathy for rape victims and women in general have already learned that they must dismiss this book as sexist, reactionary pseudo-science. News stories that treat the book as a symptom of chauvinist cultural decay have greatly outnumbered reviews that assess it as a science. Viewed sociologically, turning books into ideological touchstones can be useful. People can efficiently sort themselves out into likeminded cliques without bothering to read or think. However, there can be more to human discourse than ideological self-advertisement.

It’s unfortunate that Thornhill and Palmer themselves set up a dichotomy between the theory that rape is an adaptation (a specifically selected sexual strategy) and the theory that it is a by-product (a consequence of using violence in general), because it diverted attention from the more basic claim that rape has something to do with sex. I think their dichotomy is drawn too

sharply. Male sexuality may have evolved in a world in which women were more discriminating than men about partners and occasions for sex. That would have led men to treat female reluctance as an obstacle to be overcome. (Another way to put it is that one can imagine a species in which the male could become sexually interested only if he detected reciprocal signs of interest on the part of the female, but that humans do not appear to be such a species.) How the woman's reluctance is overcome depends on the rest of the man's psychology and on his assessment of the circumstances. His usual tactics may include being kind, persuading the woman of his good intention, and offering the proverbial bottle of wine, but may become increasingly coercive as certain risk factors are multiplied: the man is a psychopath (hence insensitive to the suffering of others), an outcast (hence immune to ostracism), a loser (with no other means to get sex), or a soldier or ethnic rioter who considers an enemy subhuman and thinks he can get away with it. Certainly most men in ordinary circumstance do *not* harbor a desire to rape. According to surveys, a violent rape is unusual in pornography and sexual fantasies, and according to laboratory studies of men's sexual arousal, depictions of actual violence toward a woman or signs of her pain and humiliation are a turnoff.

What about the more basic question of whether the motives of rapists include sex? The gender-feminist argument that they do not points to the rapists who target older, infertile women, those who suffer from sexual dysfunction during the rape, those who coerce non-reproductive sexual acts, and those who use a condom. The argument is unconvincing for two reasons. First, the examples make up a minority of rapes, so the argument could be turned around to show that most rapes do not have a sexual motive. And all these phenomena occur with consensual sex, too, so the argument leads to the absurdity that sex itself has nothing to do with sex. And date rape is a particularly problematic case for the not-sex theory. Most people agree that women have the right to say no at any point during sexual activity, and that if the man persists he is a rapist – but should we also believe that his motive has instantaneously changed from wanting sex to oppressing women?

On the other side there is an impressive body of evidence (reviewed more thoroughly by the legal scholar Owen Jones than by Thornhill and Palmer) that the motives for rape overlap with the motives for sex:

- Coerced copulation is widespread among species in the animal kingdom, suggesting that it is not selected against and may sometimes be selected for. It is found in many species of insects, birds, and mammals, including our relatives the orangutans, gorillas, and chimpanzees.
- Rape is found in all human societies.
- Rapists generally apply as much force as is needed to coerce the victim into sex. They rarely inflict a serious or fatal injury, which would preclude conception and birth. Only 4 percent of rape victims sustain serious injuries, and fewer than one in five hundred is murdered.
- Victims of rape are mostly in the peak reproductive years for women, between thirteen and thirty-five, with a mean in most data sets of twenty-four. Though many rape victims are classified as children (under the age of sixteen), most of these are adolescents, with a median age of fourteen. The age distribution is very different from that of victims of other violent crimes, and is the opposite of what would happen if rape victims were picked for their physical vulnerability or by their likelihood of holding positions of power.

- Victims of rape are more traumatized when the rape can result in conception. It is most psychologically painful for women in their fertile years, and for victims of forced intercourse as opposed to other forms of rape.
- Rapists are not demographically representative of the male gender. They are overwhelmingly young men, the age of the most intense sexual competitiveness. The young males who allegedly have been “socialized” to rape mysteriously lose that socialization as they get older.
- Though most rapes do not result in conception, many do. About 5 percent of rape victims of reproductive age become pregnant, resulting in more than 32,000 rape-related pregnancies in the United States each year. (That is why abortion is the case of rape is a significant issue.) The proportion would have been even higher in prehistory, when women did not use long-term contraception. Brownmiller wrote that biological theories of rape are “fanciful” because “in terms of reproductive strategy, the hit or miss ejaculations of a single-strike rapist are a form of Russian roulette compared to ongoing consensual mating.” But ongoing consensual mating is not an option for every male, and dispositions that resulted in hit-or-miss sex could be evolutionarily more successful than dispositions that resulted in no sex at all. Natural selection can operate effectively with small reproductive advantages, as little as 1 percent.

The payoff for a reality-based understanding of rape is the hope of reducing or eliminating it. Given the theories on the table, the possible sites for levers of influence include violence, sexist attitudes, and sexual desire.

Everyone agrees that rape is a crime of violence. Probably the biggest amplifier of rape is lawlessness. The rape and abduction of women is often a goal of raiding in non-state societies, and rape is common in wars between states and riots between ethnic groups. In peacetime, the rates of rape tend to track rates of other violent crime. In the United States, for example, the rate of forcible rape went up in the 1960s and down in the 1990s, together with the rates of other violent crimes. Gender feminists blame violence against women on civilization and social institutions, but this is exactly backwards. Violence against women flourishes in societies that are outside the reach of civilization, and erupts whenever civilization breaks down.

Though I know of no quantitative studies, the targeting of sexist attitudes does not seem to be a particularly promising avenue for reducing rape, though of course it is desirable for other reasons. Countries with far more rigid gender roles than the United States, such as Japan, have far lower rates of rape, and within the United States the sexist 1950s were far safer for women than the more liberated 1970s and 1980s. If anything, the correlation might go in the opposite direction. As women gain greater freedom of movement because they are independent of men, they will more often find themselves in dangerous situations.

What about measures that focus on the sexual components of rape? Thornhill and Palmer suggested that teenage boys be forced to take a rape-prevention course as a condition for obtaining a driver’s license, and that women should be reminded that dressing in a sexually attractive way may increase their risk of being raped. These untested prescriptions are an excellent illustration of why scientists should stay out of the policy business, but they don’t deserve the outrage that followed. Mary Koss, described as an authority on rape, said, “The thinking is absolutely unacceptable in a democratic society.” (Note the psychology of the taboo – not only is their suggestion wrong, but merely *thinking* it is “absolutely unacceptable.”) Koss continues, “Because rape is a gendered crime, such recommendations harm equality. They infringe more on women’s liberties than men’s.”

One can understand the repugnance at any suggestion that an attractively dressed woman excites an irresistible impulse to rape, or that culpability in any crime should be shifted from the perpetrator to the victim. But Thornhill and Palmer said neither of those things. They were offering a recommendation based on prudence, not an assignment of blame based on justice. Of course women have a right to dress in any way they please, but the issue is not what women have the right to do in a perfect world but how they can maximize their safety in this world. The suggestions that women in dangerous situations be mindful of reactions they may be eliciting or signals they may inadvertently be sending is just common sense, and it's hard to believe any grownup would think otherwise – unless she has been indoctrinated by the standard rape-prevention programs that tell women that “sexual assault is not an act of sexual gratification” and that “appearance and attractiveness are not relevant”. Equity feminists have called attention to the irresponsibility of such advice, in terms far harsher than anything by Thornhill and Palmer. Paglia, for example, wrote:

For a decade, feminists have drilled their disciples to say, “Rape is a crime of violence but not sex.” This sugar-coated Shirley Temple nonsense has exposed young women to disaster. Misled by feminism, they do not expect rape from the nice boys from good homes who sit next to them in class...

These girls say, “Well, I should be able to get drunk at a fraternity party and go upstairs to a guy’s room without anything happening.” And I say, “oh, really? And when you drive your car to New York City, do you leave your keys on the hood?” My point is that if your car is stolen after you do something like that, yes, the police should pursue the thief and he should be punished. But at the same time, the police – and I – have the right to say to you, “You stupid idiot, what the hell were you thinking?”

Similarly, McElroy points out the illogic of arguments like Koss’s that women should not be given practical advice that “infringes more on women’s liberties than men’s”:

The fact that women are vulnerable to attack means we cannot have it all. We cannot walk at night across an unlit campus or down a back alley, without incurring real danger. These are things every woman *should* be able to do, but “shoulds” belong in a utopian world. They belong in a world where you drop your wallet in a crowd and have it returned, complete with credit cards and cash. A world in which unlocked Porsches are parked in the inner city. And children can be left unattended in the park. This is not the reality that confronts and confines us.

The flight from reality of the rape-is-not-sex doctrine warps not just advice to women but policies for deterring rapists. Some prison systems put sex offenders in group therapy and psychodrama sessions designed to uproot experiences of childhood abuse. The goal is to convince the offenders that aggression against women is a way of acting out anger at their mothers, fathers, and society. (A sympathetic story in the *Boston Globe* concedes that “there is no way to know what the success rate of the [the] therapy is.”) Another program reeducates batterers and rapists with “pro-feminist therapy” consisting of lectures on patriarchy, heterosexism, and the connections between domestic violence and racial oppression. In an article entitled “The Patriarchy Made Me Do It,” the psychiatrist Sally Satel comments, “While it’s tempting to conclude that perhaps pro-feminist ‘therapy’ is just what a violent man deserves, the tragic fact is that truly victimized women are put in even more danger when their husbands undergo a worthless treatment.” Savvy offenders who learn to mouth the right psychobabble or feminist slogans can be seen as successfully treated, which can win them earlier release and the opportunity to prey on women anew.

In his thoughtful reviews, Jones explores how the legal issues surrounding rape can be clarified by a more sophisticated understanding that does not rule the sexual component out of bounds. One example is “chemical castration,” voluntary injections of the drug Depo-Provera, which inhibits the release of androgens and reduces the offender’s sex drive. It is sometimes given to offenders who are morbidly obsessed with sex and compulsively commit crimes such as

rape, indecent exposure, and child abuse. Chemical castration can cut recidivism rates dramatically – in one study, from 46 percent to 3 percent. Use of the drug certainly raises serious constitutional issues about privacy and punishment, which biology alone cannot decide. But the issues become cloudier, not clearer, when commentators declare a priori that “castration will not work because rape is not a crime about sex, but rather a crime about power and violence.”

Jones is not advocating chemical castration (and neither am I). He is asking people to look at all the options for reducing rape and to evaluate them carefully and with an open mind. Anyone who is incensed by the very idea of mentioning rape and sex in the same breath should read the numbers again. If a policy is rejected out of hand that can reduce rape by a factor of fifteen, then many women will be raped who otherwise might not have been. People may have to decide which they value more, an ideology that claims to advance the interests of the female gender or what actually happens in the world to real women.

Despite all the steam coming out of people’s ears in the modern debate on the sexes, there are wide expanses of common ground. No one wants to accept sex discrimination or rape. No one wants to turn back the clock and empty the universities and professions of women, even if that were possible. No reasonable person can deny that the advances in the freedom of women during the past century are an incalculable enrichment of the human condition.

All the more reason not to get sidetracked by emotionally charged but morally irrelevant red herrings. The sciences of human nature can strengthen the interests of women by separating those herrings from the truly important goals. Feminism as a movement for political and social equity is important, but feminism as an academic clique committed to eccentric doctrines about human nature is not. Eliminating discrimination against women is important, but believing that women and men are born with indistinguishable minds is not. Freedom of choice is important, but ensuring that women make up exactly 50 percent of all professions is not. And eliminating sexual assaults is important, but advancing the theory that rapists are doing their part in a vast male conspiracy is not.

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