

For Sociobiology

Edward O. Wilson

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In response to:

Against "Sociobiology" from the November 13, 1975 issue

To the Editors:

I write to protest the false statements and accusations that comprise the letter signed by Elizabeth Allen and fifteen co-signers in the November 13 *New York Review*. This letter, which is directed against my book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, is an openly partisan attack on what the signers mistakenly conclude to be a political message in the book. Every principal assertion made in the letter is either a false statement or a distortion. On the most crucial points raised by the signers I have said the opposite of what is claimed. To date, none of the many other scientists who have reviewed the book in scientific and popular journals has misinterpreted it in this or any other important way.

Allen et al. characterize *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* as the latest attempt to reinvigorate theories which in the past "provided an important basis for the enactment of sterilization laws and restrictive immigration laws by the United States between 1910 and 1930 and also for the eugenics policies which led to the establishment of gas chambers in Nazi Germany." I resent this ugly, irresponsible, and totally false accusation.

To make their case Allen et al. have selected bits from *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* and pieced them together to depict what they claim are my personal and social class prejudices. But not even the interpretations placed on these isolated fragments are accurate. The letter signers, for example, allege that I make institutions such as slavery "seem natural in human societies because of their 'universal' existence in the biological kingdom." I have done no such thing. In the book slavery is stated to occur only in ants and men, and the many distinctions between its practice in the two groups are made clear. In my June 1975 *Scientific American* article on the subject, where I felt free to editorialize, I went so far as to put the matter as follows:

Does ant slavery hold any lesson for our own species? Probably not. Human slavery is an unstable social institution that runs strongly counter to the moral systems of the great majority of human societies. Ant slavery is a genetic adaptation found in particular species that cannot be judged to be more or less successful than their non-slave-making counterparts. The slave-making ants offer a clear and interesting case of behavioral evolution, but the analogies with human behavior are much too remote to allow us to find in them any moral or political lesson.”

Allen et al. try to make me appear to be the arch hereditarian by quoting my sentence “The very opposite could be true” after a quotation from Dobzhansky stating that “In a sense human genes have surrendered their primacy in human evolution to an entirely new non-biological or super-organic agent, culture.” In fact, my sentence came fourteen lines of mostly technical information after the Dobzhansky quotation, and it really followed the sentence “It is not valid to point to the absence of a behavioral trait in one or a few societies as conclusive evidence that the trait is environmentally induced and has no genetic disposition in man.” My meaning, which refers to a lesser technical point, was thus grossly distorted by this elision. A reading of the full paragraph will show that I am far closer to Dobzhansky in my overall view than to the opposite position which seems to be indicated by the mutilated version.

I invite the reader to check all of the other pronouncements in the letter by Allen et al. against the actual statements in my book, in the true context in which the statements were made. I suggest that they will encounter very little correspondence, and I am confident that they will be left with no doubt as to my true meaning.

The pivotal indictment which Allen et al. try to pin on me is that “Wilson joins the long parade of biological determinists whose work has served to buttress the institutions of their society by exonerating them from responsibility for social problems.” I have done no such thing. In fact I have taken care elsewhere to do just the opposite. In an article published in the *New York Times Magazine* on October 12, I felt free to go well beyond the science in the book to discuss some of my personal feelings about the implications of sociobiology. Here is my concluding statement:

The moment has arrived to stress that there is a dangerous trap in sociobiology, one which can be avoided only by constant vigilance. The trap is the naturalistic fallacy of ethics, which uncritically concludes that what is, should be. The “what is” in human nature is to a large extent the heritage of a Pleistocene hunter-gatherer existence. When any genetic bias is demonstrated, it cannot be used to justify a continuing practice in present and future societies. Since most of us live in a radically new environment of our own making, the pursuit of such a practice would be bad biology; and like all bad biology, it would invite disaster. For example, the tendency under certain conditions to conduct warfare against competing groups might well be in our genes, having been advantageous to our Neolithic ancestors, but it could lead to global suicide now. To rear as many healthy children as possible was long the road to security; yet with the population of the world brimming over, it is now the way to environmental disaster. Our primitive old genes will therefore have to carry the load of much more cultural change in the future. To an extent not yet known, we trust—we insist—that human nature can adapt to more encompassing forms of altruism and social justice. Genetic biases can be trespassed, passions averted or redirected, and ethics altered; and the human genius for making contracts can continue to be applied to achieve healthier and freer societies. Yet the mind is not infinitely malleable. Human sociobiology should be pursued and its findings weighed as the best means we have of tracing the evolutionary history of the mind. In the difficult journey ahead, during which our ultimate guide must be our deepest and, at present, least understood feelings, surely we cannot afford an ignorance of history.

The *New York Times Magazine* article was sent to the editors in August. I would have taken it to Allen et al. had I known that their letter was in subsequent preparation, and I would also have asked for the chance to discuss with them their view of the implications of sociobiology. However, in spite of the fact that I have been on friendly terms with some of the signers of the letter for years, and two share the same building with me at Harvard University, I did not know of the letter’s existence until three days before it appeared in print.

I make this last point because I feel that the actions of Allen et al. represent the kind of self-righteous vigilantism which not only produces falsehood but also unjustly hurts individuals and through that kind of intimidation diminishes the spirit of free inquiry and discussion crucial to the health of the intellectual community.

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