

The Incontinence of an Ideologue

A rambling, old school diatribe composed of misunderstood theories, misremembered facts, faulty logic, and foolish sentiment

Aaron J. Brenner

Evolutionary theory -- or one of them anyway -- argues that we developed intelligence to win arguments and gain social dominance (i.e. greater access to resources and mates than competitors within our group). So it follows that everything we do to enhance our intelligence -- reading, listening to NPR, sleeping with a dictionary under our pillow, downloading that Wikipedia app -- is an effort to outcompete our fellow humans for the best jobs, the best mates, and the best table at Olive Garden. We may dress up our impulses in the fancy finery of cultured discourse, but our behaviors still betray the clowns that linger beneath and soil our silken undergarments. No matter how far we think we have come, underneath we are still animals driven to compete for the survival.

Now one may argue that we are so much more evolved than that -- because one is an obnoxious intellectual who would argue with his own belly button lint just to show off all his fancy book learning and to distract from the fact that he was never really good at sports. Regardless, I would offer a single counter: Trump. For the most part, we are idiots who act on visceral impulses and ignore cerebral second-guessing. There are exceptions, of course -- there are always exceptions . . . supposedly they prove the rule. But even some of the great philosophers of antiquity studied in this seminar don't look so smart through the lens of time. Wet shoes make us tough? Avoid society at all costs if you really want to learn and then find a nice dutiful woman to help you integrate into the society you've done your best to avoid? Why would she want you? Rely on reason and logic and evidence except when it doesn't suit your illogical attachment to religion? Demand your equality and independence but then attempt to kill yourself -- twice -- if the loser you are attracted to in spite of your massive intellect rejects you for an actress? Not exactly a fine sampling from the list of ingredients on the bottle labeled genius. No, we are most certainly imperfect creatures beholden to biology and beggared by the demands of our DNA. Any careful inspection of our institutions reveals not the best efforts of the most noble humans so much as the bitter entanglements of alpha males (because it is mostly men who run and ruin the show), red in tooth and claw, better prepared for pissing contests than polite conversations and charitable donations.

An unfortunate aspect of our evolutionary motives is that they fairly destroy any chance we might have of creating a system of education that is truly universal and equitable. However, if we accept as given that our primary goal is survival, that almost all of our other behaviors tend to serve -- directly or indirectly -- that goal, then we can begin to examine how we might manage that drive to survive before it corrupts our more noble endeavors to educate everyone and create an egalitarian society in which we may all reap the benefits of our collective brilliance. In my own clumsy and poorly researched way, that is what I would like to do in this paper. I would like to demonstrate how our evolutionary impulses lead to beliefs and behaviors that make education inherently unfair and tend to ruin our attempts at an equitable system, even under circumstances wherein we have the requisite resources and, with a little cooperation, could

facilitate a reasonable measure of success for everyone. Unless we own these powerful drives, and then design schools and curricula that will enable us to work within or overcome them, we will be enabling our evolutionary impulses to exacerbate the socio-economic inequalities that plague both schools and American society as a whole and lay to waste the lives of many underprivileged children.

The first and perhaps most surprisingly problematic component of evolution is cooperation. Under ideal circumstances a community enables us to gather food and raise offspring more efficiently and effectively. Under less than ideal circumstances you get Red Sox fans vs Yankee fans, Democrats vs Republicans, the alcoholic members of my family vs the newly reformed AA attendees, and people who watch NASCAR vs people who don't marry their cousins. You get tribalism. You get associations for the good of a select group that often come at the expense of people who do not have the resources or good fortune to be a part of that select group. You get private schools, schools with performance-based admissions, well-funded schools in neighborhoods in which the teachers can't afford to live, charter schools -- basically any school that requires you to have been born a little blessed in order to attend. This results in a drain on resources (socio-cultural capital as well as financial) from the public schools attended by the most disadvantaged kids in our society (rural as well as inner city).

One plausible solution to this problem is to abolish all such schools. Force those parents to send their kids to the public schools and expend their money and energy improving those institutions for the betterment of the whole society rather than having their resources serve only their small coterie of privileged progeny. If you allow parents with specific, exclusionary ideologies or belief systems to isolate themselves within a smaller community, you limit our ability to empathize with one another and create a larger society of human beings who look out for each other in true egalitarian fashion. A primary reason we don't mind if other people's kids suffer in poor educational environments is because they are other people's kids in places other than where we are. They aren't our kids, they aren't like our kids, and somewhere in our lizard brains they are inferior to our kids. But if our kids had to go to school with those kids, maybe they would learn that those kids aren't all that different from our kids. Maybe they would develop empathy and start thinking about how everyone should be treated well rather than just the people who remind us of ourselves in the most superficial ways. However, if you allow wealthy kids (or religious indoctrinees or just kids who happen to have a doting, reasonably well-educated parent) to isolate themselves in special schools they are forced to rationalize their privilege (if they are aware of it at all) and they usually do that by telling themselves (or being told) that they are better than other people and therefore deserve more than those people. If we any eliminate any easy slide into isolationism, avoid the circumstances that lend to our inborn tribalism, perhaps we can expand our empathy and share our resources among the wider population.

Of course, that is unlikely because of the flip side of the cooperation coin: competition. The proud parents of children in elitist academic situations are unlikely to acquiesce to this reform because they are delighted with the status quo as it allows their offspring are getting a leg up . . . or a ladder up (or perhaps an elevator is the better metaphor) which ensures the likelihood of their genetic survival. It isn't their fault exactly, they are designed by nature to compete, but sometimes that is a bad thing. Now, don't get me wrong, I love competition. I am a male, I play sports, I am insecure -- I am all about competition. But it is our innate drive to compete that

prevents us from fixing the flaws in our failing schools (as well as the much more pervasive and damaging flaws in society) so that all our kids can compete on a level playing field (even if the poor kids still don't get shoes, fancy uniforms, and personal coaching from former professionals like the rich kids do).

If we won't abolish segregated schools, we could still amend much of the inequality by sending the most money and the best teachers to the worst schools. Right now the amount of money spent on the education of advantaged kids in public and private schools (both at home and at school) far exceeds that spent on educating the rural and urban poor (especially if you subtract the amount that is misspent on not educating them and instead paying the villains who take advantage of the ignorance and chaos that is often pervasive in poorer districts). I believe the ratio is something like three gazillion to one, but I could be hyperbolizing that number to make a point that shouldn't need to be made. The children from healthy homes in wealthy districts do not need the best teachers and they already have the most money. They already won the genetic lottery and good advice on how to spend their winnings is not at all necessary (and often ignored). Besides, I suspect that most of the truly brilliant members of the human race have flourished in spite of their formalized education more than because of it. We could easily divert funds from wealthier districts and the endowments of private schools to the poorest districts if only the hedge fund parents and old money elitists could ease up on their hyper-competitive, "life is a game of Monopoly" attitudes and recognize they will still be left with plenty of cash and influence to buy their children admission to Harvard or Yale or that expensive drug and alcohol rehab facility all the best members of their families have attended.

If we can identify the best teachers -- which may not be so simple at first -- sending them to the worst schools should be easy because with our incredible influx of funding, we can start paying them more for the hard work they will have to do. (Although the best teachers don't do it for the money, they would probably still appreciate a little cash recognition of their accomplishments.) Assigning them thus would serve two important purposes: it gives those disadvantaged students something to help them compete fairly against their more fortunate peers; and it will reveal if those teachers truly are the best. A school full of smart, well-adjusted kids with loads of social capital can easily hide a mediocre teacher. Because learning comes easy to them, because they are generally polite in an educational environment (owing to a lack of that sense of frustration and and futility that plagues so many weaker students) they do well regardless of the competence of their instructor. If you want to know if you are a good teacher, then go teach in a failing school. If you can reach those kids, if you can compensate for the myriad social, economic, and biological handicaps that plague their progress and still produce a well-educated population, then you deserve a six figure salary. If you can't, you can always return to school where the naturally curious, naturally talented, and socially adaptive kids make you look like you are every bit as amazing as you would like to imagine you are.

But of course, that ideal is also in direct opposition to our natural proclivities. Parents want the best teachers for their kids (or at least the ones who appear to be the best according to their fine résumés) and will use their social and financial capital to secure them -- the rest of the world be damned; it's a capitalist system after all. Parents want their offspring to win and will do what it takes to secure that victory. Teachers also want to win, want to demonstrate their superiority to potential competitors and potential mates, so why would they teach at a school where failure (as

it is currently measured through testing data) is inevitable and the stress is unbearable? Rare is the teacher (and possibly stupid) who would give up a cushy job at a posh private school or affluent public school for a turn in the trenches with the rural or urban poor. No, our desire to win will conquer whatever noble idealism we espouse about helping the downtrodden.

Liberals (and I am one) often passionately express their concern for underprivileged children even as they move to the suburbs or enroll their own kids in private schools. This isn't because they are bad people; it is simply because our noble aspirations cannot overwhelm our unconscious biological machinations. We don't want people to suffer because we don't want to suffer, but if the choice is between a nail in my foot and railroad spike through yours, most of us would instinctively rather witness the suffering of others than experience it for ourselves (or our children). If liberals really cared about the plight of urban (or rural) schools, they would move into benighted neighborhoods and enroll their kids in the local schools. They would get involved in those schools, teach in those schools, and interact with those disadvantaged kids as much as their time, energy, and emotional courage would allow. The best thing for struggling children and communities is to have plenty of role models around to show them the path toward improvement. We don't need Superman; we need super moms and super dads and super citizens to care about more than just their own children. This is easy for me to say because I have no children of my own, but it is hard for me to watch my students struggle in large part because they are segregated in communities from which most of the positive role models have fled. Heroes give us inspiration but they rarely swoop in to save us; role models show us how to do the difficult work of saving ourselves.

Of course, if you wanted to get really radical -- and I wouldn't read this next few paragraphs if you don't -- we have to tackle the problem of people having children who shouldn't be having children. We could solve many of the problems of modern education by simply not allowing anyone under the age of twenty-one or anyone without a high school diploma (or some other somewhat arbitrary notion of social competence and responsibility) to reproduce. Nationally, teen pregnancy and STD rates are the lowest they have been in a long time, but if you were to survey my students you would find that almost all of them know at least one girl who has gotten pregnant while in high school (and often the father is an older man who preys on their youth and innocence). The statistics on teen pregnancy are terrifying when it comes to future prospects for both the mother and the child. The likelihood of the mothers dropping out of high school and ending up on welfare is high. The chances their children will repeat this pattern is also high. The statistics for Hispanic and African-American girls are even worse. There are very few positive outcomes for young inner-city women who are careless about their (or coerced into) sexual activity. In these case the evolutionary impulses of my students are imperiling not only their current lives but any successful future they may hope to have.

There is a biological imperative to reproduce that often overwhelms even the educated good sense of teenagers. Research suggests that teenagers who engage in unprotected sex are knowledgeable of the risks and aware of the remedies, but in the heat of the moment their education fails and their instincts take over -- especially if their current prospects do not paint an especially appealing portrait of the future. So why wouldn't we do something more drastic to prevent them from having children? (And while we are at it, why not prevent rich people who hire nannies to raise their babies from having children as well?) Sure, the outcry against that

would be deafening. But why? People will argue racism, classism, sexism, fascism, totalitarianism, and any other “ism” they can spit out through angry, indignant teeth, but those are not really the reasons -- those are just the lame projections of their innate impulse to promote their own reproductive freedom because that is evolutionary directive number one. The same applies to any argument that such a plan of action would offend their religious beliefs. If they really want to understand evolution and other basic concepts of scientific inquiry, then maybe it is time to let go of the fairy tale father in the sky. Life has never been sacred; if it was we would have universal healthcare and no budget for war. What is sinful, though, is our complicity in allowing and then ignoring the unfortunate lives of all the unwanted and uncared for children who result from unplanned pregnancies (or ones that are sadly and stupidly idealized -- I have had students who had kids because they just wanted someone to love them unconditionally, someone who couldn't leave them).

Some might argue the historical evidence for disliking any idea that gives the government power to prevent people from having children, but that still speaks to evolutionary fears about survival. We would reject such a program is because it offends that fundamental component of our evolutionary need to survive: the drive to reproduce. We can cloak it in notions of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, but we deny those to people all the time. Most of our laws are in place to protect us from the stupid choices we all occasionally make and a few of us make far too often, so what's one more rule inhibiting our freedoms if it can most definitely be argued to serve the greater good. Again, as someone without children, it is easy to offer inflammatory rhetoric proposing what may appear as a pogrom against poor people, but in education there are no bad ideas when you are brainstorming.

Of course, it is good advice to think globally but act locally, and none of the above ideas are feasible, so since I am an English teacher, perhaps I may make one vague suggestion that could be implemented in the classroom to improve the educational attainment of our underserved populations. I've been thinking a lot lately about reading -- not in the same way my students thinking about reading as they manage to do everything but their required reading -- I've been thinking about the nature and process of reading and why so few people -- adults and children alike -- seem to enjoy it. The obvious answers are because it's difficult and it's boring (when compared to the far more enticing options for entertainment available to us through modern technology). The less obvious answer is that it is often evolutionarily unnecessary. We simply do not need to read to satisfy our most basic impulses for survival.

The research tells us that it is important to read to children -- that children who were read to on a regular basis generally outperform children who were not read to regularly, both during school and later in life. But since when has research ever convinced anyone? If it did, we would no longer be having debates about evolution, about man's impact on climate, or about the health benefits of eating chocolate instead of vegetables at every meal. Clearly, science has no place in any modern debate -- it's all about what we feel in our guts. Just look at the current political landscape . . . I rest my case.

Now my gut tells me (and luckily, evolutionary biology backs me up as well) that I like to read because I was read to as a small child. Being read to on a regular basis, not only made me a quicker study of the reading process and ultimately a more fluent reader, it also imbued me with

a feeling that reading was one of the best ways I could connect with the people I love. Practically the only moments during my childhood when I had my mom's complete and undivided attention were when she was reading to me and when I was about to do something that was likely to get me killed and/or cost her a whole lot of money. In the first case, the experience was usually associated with the warm comfort of my bed, the soothing tones of my mother's voice describing the friendship between Frog and Toad, and the reassuring feeling that – if only for a few moments before sleep – there was an escape from the anxiety and unhappy endings of the real world. In the second case, there was lots of screaming and occasionally a spanking. So I suppose you can guess which kind of experience has proved a strong motivator to read whenever I get the chance.

Still, my love of reading has at its roots in my subconscious desire for survival. Social bonds are necessary for success and survival and none are so important as those between parent and child (at least until that child is old enough to thrive independently). I love reading because it reminds me of the bond I had with my mother before I became a teenager and realized that being snotty and insecure is a much better way to cement relationships. I love reading because it gave me a reason to talk with my favorite aunt who always bought me ice cream and asked what I was reading before she handed me something new to explore from her extensive library. I love reading because it connected me to the friends I still have from high school. I love reading because even growing up in Kansas, a state not known for the erudition of its citizens, the houses of all the smartest people I ever knew had whole rooms devoted to books and I wanted to be just like them when I grew up and eventually got a house (or a double-wide trailer) of my own. Reading was a way of identifying the community (or tribe) to which I wished to belong because it was modeled by the adults around me, presumably (though not consciously) as a way of enhancing my competitiveness in the larger world.

Other kids who like to read undoubtedly understand (though maybe not consciously) that reading cements their bonds to the communities which they feel will ultimately make them more capable competitors. If well off kids seem more apt to thrive in school, then it is because they can see clearly that an education is the most direct and acceptable path to success (which translates at the genetic level to improved chances for survival and access to the most attractive and viable partners for reproduction). If poor kids seem less enthusiastic about school, then that is because there is little to convince them that an education will mitigate the threats to their survival or increase their access to wealth and viable mates. If both of these groups discover that social media and social awareness through modern technology are greater keys to accomplishing evolutionary goals, then school may be seen as simply a necessary evil attended to prevent the authorities from inhibiting their freedoms and limiting their opportunities for social access (and potentially dominance). But if we can convince our underprivileged kids that education as a whole and reading in particular can compensate them for the deficits of their birth and enable them to survive and compete at a level compatible with their more fortunate peers, then we may find it easier to persuade them to put down their phones and pick up a book. But I wouldn't count -- hold on, I gotta take this call.

Still, does everyone really need to learn to love reading? Do our evolutionary impulses really require it as a strategy for success even in modern society? Certainly one could argue that for much of human history, the illiterate have reproduced in numbers far greater than those of the

well-educated. Recent research suggests that the longevity of unschooled individuals is diminished directly or indirectly by their ignorance, but not to such an extent as to encourage greater numbers of them to pursue educational enlightenment or to keep them from reproducing at rates far in excess of more educated populations. Evolutionarily, we are not designed to be readers. We are designed to gather information that will ensure our survival and enable reproduction. In as much as familial and community bonds promote these goals and reading promotes these bonds, a shared canon of literature (or at least stories – because the oral tradition has a longer history and is more pervasive than the written word) is necessary. In as much as reading provides the information necessary to best achieve these goals, reading itself will be attractive to the individual. But when our brains evolved, there was no writing and the gathering of such information required the use of all our senses – most especially sight, hearing, and smell. So when modern technology can appeal to two of those senses in the process of disseminating essential (or nonessential) information, how can reading, which stimulates only one and offers much less relevant (seemingly) information at a much slower pace, really compete? Communication and perception were largely lacking in complex symbolism when our brains evolved – there was no alphabet, there were no written words until very recently in our evolution – so how can writing with its lack of literal ease and obvious appeal to our visual senses survive against video images that mimic the real world in a much more vivid and readily digestible way?

Even putting our evolutionary predilections aside, reading has almost universally been the province of the wealthier classes of society, an occupation of privilege rather than survival, so there will always be a bias toward elitism in our expectations that every child read at a high level. If we truly wanted to accommodate a universal education unfettered by socio-cultural prejudices, then we would promote an oral tradition of storytelling because all cultures have embraced that regardless of wealth or technological advancement. However, if our goal is to prepare our students to take an active role in the world in which they live, then that is the world run by readers (our current administration excepted), and being indoctrinated into a love of literature from an early age is an American ideal if not a consistent practice.

I teach low-level juniors, most of whom do not like to read – unless you consider the avid and ongoing consumption of text messages, Twitter feeds, Instagram updates, and the ephemeral offerings of Snapchat to qualify as reading. Some of these kids can read relatively well, but find it dull in comparison to the aforementioned attractions; many others dislike reading because it is painfully difficult for them. Almost none of them read regularly enough to know for sure if it is a cognitive deficit or simple disinterest that prevents them from reading proficiently and enjoying the experience. Many of my students, however, have been tested and found to read below grade level, sometimes well below level. Regardless, they have been passed along each year because that is easier and less expensive than addressing their individual deficits. (Besides, if you can become president without ever having read a book, why should your inability or unwillingness to do so prevent you from graduating high school.) Some of these students have diagnosed disabilities; others have flown under the radar because no one (parents, teachers, counselors, etc.) has actively and persistently advocated for them. And even if we wanted to identify and address the needs of every student, the expense of doing so would be enough to bankrupt the district. So we are left with few resources and many students who are badly in need

of extra help if we wish to graduate young men and women who are not only able to read, but are also occasionally excited to do so.

The reasons for reading deficits among our student body are manifold. Environmental and biological factors both play significant roles. Some students grew up in homes where parents did not read to their children nor encourage reading because the parents were absent, overworked, disinterested, illiterate, abusive, unable to speak, read, and/or write English. Then there are the more mundane causes of their deficits: pervasive technology, an anti-intellectual society, myriad distractions, an ever-increasing demand for immediate gratification, and evolutionary biology.

Mostly, classes are a battle to engage and maintain the attentions of wandering and frequently worried minds in fierce competition with whatever next appears on an individual's cell phone and whatever terror awaits them at home. Texts are chosen, not because one would (or could) argue they contribute to some indispensable canon of classic literature, but because they are of high interest to an otherwise disinterested audience. I would wish that I was dealing with an educational anomaly, and that no other school system in the United States resembles this school in any of its deficits, but having taught at schools across the cultural and socio-economic spectrum, I can tell you that my school suffers from no illness that is not widespread. Recent studies of adolescent brains have suggested the neural networks of young people (to say nothing of their social skills) are being dramatically altered by their continual access to technology; we simply are not dealing with the same brains that previous generations of students possessed and these new brains are often too impatient and too inattentive to read well. Regardless of intellect or interest, teachers face a challenge that is poorly understood and largely unaddressed by current pedagogy. Books cannot compete with each new technology when it comes to neural stimulation and immediate gratification. I am sure this comment echoes those made during the advent of radio and television, but the threat has increased exponentially in recent decades and when literary texts have to compete with social media and rapidly shrinking attention spans, it is a wonder that anyone under that age of thirty reads at all.

So as a teacher, what should I do now with a classroom full of teenagers who were not read to when they were little, who have no interest in reading because it does not remind them of quality time with family members and it does not seem to offer them better times with their friends? Who do not see reading as offering any significant enjoyment or advantage in their immediate lives? Who cannot understand, intrinsically or otherwise, how reading might bolster their their abilities to survive and compete in this world?

I have no panacea that will return us to the foggy nostalgia of the "golden age" of education, but I do know that simply telling my students that reading is good for them will not suffice, and appealing to elitism by offering that literacy increases social capital will only elicit expressions of disinterest or disgust (among those students who even understand what I am saying). If I want them to read regularly, I have to get them to make a visceral connection to reading; I have to give them the skills to make simple comprehension and complex literary analysis more gratifying than the mindless consumption of whatever easy entertainment their televisions and computers offer – which seems impossible; I have to get them to need stories, and poems, and essays in the same way they seem to need the applications on their cell phones. One key may be to stimulate their evolutionary impulses, to show them that the connections they can make through reading

are stronger than any virtual friendship they might form on the internet, and that avenues reading will open lead to far better neighborhoods than the ones in which they currently live (or will enable them to improve their own neighborhoods so they are no longer places any educated person would wish to escape). Perhaps by doing this we can make reading something fun again (or for the first time), something that does not torture them or expose their stupidity. Perhaps we can nurture the bonds that reading creates between people and communities, giving us a wider sense of empathy and belonging and security as well as satisfying our need for a competitive edge in the game of survival. If we do not, then maybe our students grow up and they don't read anything longer than a Facebook post or a Twitter announcement because reading never had any deeply-felt rewards attached to it. But if we can, then maybe a few more of my students will get to reap the benefits of be---oh, hold on a second, I really gotta take this call.