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Book Review

The Myth of Promiscuity

A review of Lynn Saxon, *Sex at Dusk: Lifting the Shiny Wrapping from Sex at Dawn*. Createspace: Lexington, KY, 2012, 364 pp., US\$15.49, ISBN #978-1477697283 (paperback).

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The book *Sex at Dawn* was published in 2010 and quickly became a best-seller, receiving kudos from well-known personages such as sex advice columnist Dan Savage, and primatologist Frans de Waal (Savage calling it the “most important book on human sexuality” since Kinsey’s 1948 *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male*¹; de Waal dubbing it an “exciting book” that raises issues that will “need debating over and over”²). *Sex at Dawn* appears to have struck a chord with a certain starry-eyed segment of the reading public, as well as some academics who should know better.

For those unfamiliar with *Sex at Dawn* (Ryan and Jethá, 2010), the main thrust of the book is its claim that, contrary to conventional scientific wisdom—called the “standard narrative of evolutionary psychology”—pair-bonding, sexual jealousy, a male concern with paternity certainty, and host of other related traits are not “natural” components of evolved human sexuality. Rather, they are the product of the social arrangements attending the emergence of agriculture beginning only about 10,000 years ago. Our true nature, the authors of *Sex at Dawn* argue, is one closer to that of what they think bonobo sexuality is, i.e., fluid, promiscuous sexual relations between all individuals, with little sexual conflict to speak of. Ryan and Jethá argue that the evidence points to the conclusion that promiscuous sexuality characterized our ancestral hunter-gatherer past, and that those evolutionary scientists who formulated and uphold the “standard narrative” are mistakenly projecting modern, post-agricultural mores onto our ancestors as well as contemporary small-scale societies.

While the book continues in its lay popularity, it has not achieved a position of respect, or even much attention, from researchers who would likely be associated with the so-called standard narrative. A call to arms suggested in a review of *Sex at Dawn* has gone

¹ Front cover blurb on paperback edition of *Sex at Dawn*.

² <http://www.sexatdawn.com/page21/page21.html>

virtually unheeded (Ellsworth, 2011). That is, until now. Independent scholar Lynn Saxon has taken up the task of writing a book-length meticulously researched critique of *Sex at Dawn*, titled *Sex at Dusk: Lifting the Shiny Wrapping from Sex at Dawn*. As will be shown below, Saxon's critical analysis proves to be a thoroughly withering one, exposing not only *Sex at Dawn*'s many, many misunderstandings, errors, omissions, and perhaps intentional mistreatment of the "evidence" of our ostensibly promiscuous sexual nature, but also an ideological agenda buried in the mire of shoddy science. A chapter-by-chapter review of the numerous problems addressed in the book would necessitate a grossly inappropriate number of pages, and I therefore confine the forgoing to discussion of some of the more or less overarching theoretical and ideological issues confronted in *Sex at Dusk*.

Writing a book review of a book about another book is made even more complicated by the similarity of their titles. Before proceeding to an examination of some of the more crucial parts of *Sex at Dusk*, it is necessary to introduce some designatory abbreviations. When not spelled out in full, *Sex at Dawn* (Ryan and Jethá, 2010) will hereafter be identified by *Dawn*; and *Sex at Dusk* (Saxon, 2012) by *Dusk*.

Saxon begins her book where Ryan and Jethá did not, and indeed could not—a clear account of evolutionary biological theory. *Dawn* could not begin this way because of the particular theses advanced therein. Had it done so, perhaps the entire enterprise would have been abandoned at the outset. For, as demonstrated throughout *Dusk*, Ryan and Jethá's arguments simply are not consistent with the established principles of evolution by natural selection (some examples are given below).

In the introductory exposition of evolutionary theory, Saxon emphasizes the importance of a correct grasp of what evolution is, how it works, and what it leads to, for a true understanding of ourselves and the living world around us; something she does not credit to Ryan and Jethá: "Though the authors may accept that evolutionary theory does apply to other species there is no indication that they understand why this is so, i.e., why evolutionary theory and especially natural selection are such powerful concepts" (p. 12). A noteworthy piece of evidence that Ryan and Jethá suffer lacunae in even rudimentary understandings of evolutionary theory is made plain by their question, "why presume the monogamous pair-based model of human evolution currently favored would have been adaptive for early humans, but not for bonobos in the jungles of central Africa?" (quoted by Saxon, p. 142) It can be added that such a daft question also casts doubt on their knowledge of paleoanthropology; perhaps this is why, as Saxon points out, the *Dawn* "story only really begins with [modern] bonobos and chimpanzees, quickly leaping to modern humans from 200,000 years ago" (p. 12).

Chapter 2 continues the lesson on fundamental evolutionary biology, touching on the evolution of sexual reproduction and its consequences, especially sexually selected male and female differences and conflict among and between the sexes over reproduction. Throughout discussion of this material, and in numerous other places in *Dusk*, Saxon is careful to point out that the evolutionary process decidedly does not necessarily (indeed, rarely does) have happiness, harmony, or well-being as its outcome (e.g., pp. 23, 220-272). Selection acts on a singular basis—differential proliferation of genes. And genetic success often comes at the expense of those things we value as humans such as peace and long, healthy lives. This is a point that Saxon argues Ryan and Jethá do not understand or do not

acknowledge, and the absence of its recognition serves as a crucial component of their overall thesis.

Chapter 3 begins the examination of the behavior and social structure of our closest living relatives, the great apes. In this, and subsequent chapters, *Dusk* fills in the primatological gaps that *Dawn* left out, such as the incontrovertible existence of inter- and intra-group aggression in non-provisioned chimpanzee populations (pp. 87, 226-228). Also revealed is the existence of sexual conflict (e.g., pp. 94-97), female mate discrimination (e.g., p. 102) and aggression in bonobos (pp. 87, 97, 104-106), as well as the decidedly un-humanlike nature of bonobo sexual activity (or perhaps it is the un-bonobolike nature of human sexual activity?) (pp. 97-101). The account of chimpanzees and bonobos given by Saxon would have been a most inconvenient stumbling block had something similarly detailed been included in *Dawn*. The erroneous, incomplete portrayal of primate behavior in general, and bonobo social structure and behavior in particular, is what allows *Dawn* to persist in its conceptualization of ancestral humans as bonobolike.

Later in the book, this *Dawn* fiction is pursued further in discussion of a feature of human sociality that makes us unique among our ape cousins: extensive social alliances that transcend the local kin group. Because Ryan and Jethá do not take into account the fact of philopatry and emigration in sexually reproducing social animals, they are stuck with advancing the argument that our ancestors, both male and female, lived out their lives in small isolated bands they were born into; what, to a biologist, would be considered isolated breeding populations (a strange assumption to make given what we know about the distribution of variation among contemporary humans) (pp. 231-233). But the important point about this argument, and the one Saxon rightly emphasizes, is that, along with promiscuous mating, it cannot account for what has been called the human “meta-group social structure” (Walker, et al. 2011). The extension of cooperative relations across localized kin groups is a hallmark of *Homo sapiens* social structure. Chimpanzees and bonobos do not, indeed cannot, achieve this because males remain in their natal group and do not recognize their offspring, while females emigrate at sexual maturity, thereby severing ties with kin in their group of birth. Thus, a bonobo model of ancestral humans up to the advent of agriculture cannot account for the meta-group social structure of humans, including ancestral and modern-day foragers. Needless to say, Ryan and Jethá do not even attempt to rectify this major snag.

Following Chapais (2008), Saxon lays out a scenario of how modern human social structure might have evolved (pp. 235-239). And a key element in this scenario is pair-bonding. Without pair-bonding there is no paternal recognition, and without paternal recognition there is no patrilineal kinship reckoning. In our male philopatric ancestors, an emigrating female would have been the facilitator of alliance formation between her male kin and those of her mate in the group she immigrates into. Promiscuous mating such as occurs in chimpanzees or bonobos does not allow for the human kind of kinship, nor the pacific relations between males from different birth groups that lead to tribal-level associations that must have been of paramount importance during our evolutionary history (p. 237). As Saxon states, “the stable male-female pair bond created the means to increase group size and to open up extensive social, political, and economic networks; it was, and despite many problems has always been, crucial” (p. 239). With a focus on sexual relations

as a mechanism of building and maintaining cooperative alliances within groups, Ryan and Jethá fail to realize the significance of marriage and reproduction in building and maintaining cooperative alliances between groups.

Of course, not only does promiscuous mating not allow for the evolution of human social structure as observed across human populations, it also does not allow for the evolution of the equally cross-culturally ubiquitous trait of (comparatively) intensive paternal investment. While *Dawn* assumes that sharing sexual partners would somehow also entail sharing paternal responsibilities, Saxon shows this to be another egregious misunderstanding of evolutionary logic on the part of Ryan and Jethá (pp. 138-139). It is true that paternity uncertainty can and does increase the chances of offspring survival in some species, through reducing the risk of infanticide by males. However, not killing particular infants and directly investing resources towards them are very different things, and the latter will not be favored by selection unless this behavior contributes to the investing males' reproductive success; that is, unless males are investing in their own progeny, and not those of another male. Pair-bonding, not promiscuity, paves the way for the evolution of paternal investment.

On a more fundamental level, if humans were and are naturally promiscuous, then there would not even be pair-bonding to argue for as being unnatural. Pair-bonding and marriage are cross-cultural universals, something that, as Saxon points out, *Dawn* does not even attempt to account for (pp. 158, 161). The fact that marriage has been recorded for even those foraging societies that had previously been unaffected by agricultural contemporaries at the time of first contact means that any explanation of marriage and pair-bonding that attributes these traits to the consequences of an agricultural mode of subsistence is simply untenable. The absence of any explanation for long-term monogamous or polygynous mating arrangements across non-agricultural human societies is a big hole in the *Dawn* story that Ryan and Jethá apparently felt no need to address.

So what is all this talk of human promiscuity in *Dawn* all about, really? When an argument so blatantly and so stubbornly persists in the face of what would seem to be clear, undeniable evidence against it, it is usually a good idea to look for something other than dispensation of accurate knowledge about the world as a motive. Frequently, the obverse of accurate understanding of how the world is, is ideological pronouncement on how the world ought to be.

Where *Sex at Dusk* really shines is in Saxon's exposé of the subtler prescriptive message of *Dawn*. Ryan and Jethá are not simply arguing for a revision of the scientific view of ancestral human sexuality as more promiscuous than the "standard narrative" would have it. Upon closer inspection, what they are actually up to is advocating for a change in *contemporary* human *female* sexual behavior, or at least a change in how everyone views women's sexuality; specifically, *Dawn* advocates a shift from women as "whores," to women as "sluts" (e.g., pp. 64, 159)³. You see, according to *Dawn*, a whore is a female who engages in sexual activity in exchange for resources or other benefits beyond

³ "Whores" and "sluts" are *Sex at Dawn* author Christopher Ryan's expressions (Ryan and Jethá, 2010, 'About the book' postscript, pp. 6-7).

the act itself. A slut is a female who engages in promiscuous sexual activity only for the sake and pleasure of it. Ryan and Jetha attempt to convince the reader that whoredom is an unnatural consequence of post-Pleistocene cultural systems (and a bad thing), while the slut is a female's natural, primitive state (and a good thing). *Au contraire*, Saxon argues, whores are the order of the day across the living world (p. 328). Even *Dawn's* paragons of promiscuity, female bonobos, are strategic about when and with whom they engage in sexual behavior, as if to maximize returns on the effort (e.g., pp. 105, 108). The reason for widespread whoredom, Saxon explains, can be traced to the disparities between males and females in parental investment. Reproduction involves a quite significant investment of resources on the part of females, human females especially. Such a costly endeavor explains why females are, in most species, the choosier, more discriminating sex when it comes to mating; and the more costly reproduction is, the choosier females are. Thus, if human females are in some way anomalous in this regard, as the characterization of women's sexuality by *Dawn* makes them out to be, it must be explained *why*. I assume the reader does not need to be told of *Dawn's* success or failure at providing such an explanation.

So how do Ryan and Jetha expose the sluts of Eden dwelling within modern women? By downplaying, if not expunging, mate choice from the human female; or at least mate choice involving the use of their mental faculties. For the most part, *Dawn* simply posits the promiscuous tendencies and lack of choosiness in ancestral women. However, they do bring some evidence to bear in attempt to support their contentions. For example, female erotic plasticity is meant to show that women's bodies, not their brains, know what they really want (e.g., pp. 199-200, 290-291). Their physiological responses are genuine, revealing their true promiscuous nature, while their conscious brains are corrupted by modern society, preventing them from realizing this. Disconnect between physiological responses and verbal reports are also used by Ryan and Jetha to try to convince us that female relationship jealousy is another modern day phenomenon; that is, women, by nature, aren't really jealous of their partners' extra-pair dalliances—they only think they should be.

Saxon argues that the emphasis on sperm competition in *Dawn* is also part of the larger agenda of removing female pre-copulatory mate choice from the picture of human female sexuality (e.g., pp. 200, 225). Rather than conceiving of Pleistocene forager females as exercising discriminatory choice of sexual partners, we are to imagine instead that any choice that occurred did so unconsciously and through the physiological barriers in the female reproductive tract designed to make sure only the best sperm got through to fertilize the egg. However, as Saxon points out, there are numerous problems with this scenario of ubiquitous sperm competition in ancestral humans. The corpus of morphological, physiological, and genetic evidence does not support the contention that sperm competition played a major role in hominin evolution (pp. 248-272). But, again, *Dawn* is loath to let evidence get in the way of its message. "[I]n this fantasy world of *Sex at Dawn* young females are not meant to make mating decisions with their heads—or eyes, it would seem—but let all the men in, young and old, ugly or handsome, and let those wonderful sperm fight it out" (p. 318).

Curiously, for all the downplaying of female mate choice, back-bending attempts to demonstrate promiscuity in the ethnographic record, and promotion of the social

construction of female sexual preferences, male mate choice and sexual preferences remain intact and right in line with the “standard narrative” view. Indeed, the flip side of *Dawn*’s ideological coin is the exoneration of men for seeking sexual variety—especially in the form of multiple young, attractive, fertile extra-pair sexual partners (e.g., pp. 316-317). The following paragraph from *Dusk* summarizes the prescriptive agenda Saxon distills from *Sex at Dawn*:

Their argument is one for the equalization of male access to women and the removal of conscious female mate choices, therefore ending the sexual rejection experienced by most males. In complete contrast, women at no point are argued as all being equally attractive to men, and the authors’ discussion of women’s bodies and sexual signals strongly suggests that they do recognize that men have quite strong mate preferences for young, fertile, and attractive women. The *Sex at Dawn* argument is about men of all ages and ranges of attractiveness getting access to the most desirable female bodies, i.e., that the sexes are equal but one sex is more equal than the other (p. 287).

In this analysis, *Sex at Dawn* has been caught with its ideological pants down. “[R]ather than a plausible potential explanation of our evolution, [*Dawn*]...reveals itself as a contemporary middle-class, child-free, sex-obsessed, male fantasy projected back onto prehistory” (p. 209). “The shiny, superficially egalitarian wrapping of ‘shared sex’...makes it no less of a male fantasy” (p. 201). *Sex at Dusk* raises the question of just how much of what makes *Sex at Dawn* such an inaccurate portrayal of human sexuality can really be chalked up to naivety on the part of its authors. After all, the sources cited by Ryan and Jethá to support their claims are the very same sources that, examined more closely, Saxon uses to refute them. I have always suspected that the popular appeal of *Sex at Dawn* lay in the widespread tendency of people to see the world as they wish it to be, rather than how it really is. If this is correct, Saxon’s book will surely be anathema to the romantic devotees of the *Sex at Dawn* story. But for those who wish to see the record set straight, or merely learn more about who we are and where we came from, *Sex at Dusk* is sure to be rewarding.

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