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Book Review: A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion

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A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion. Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 2000, 251 pp. (hardcover) US\$28.95. Reviewed by Susan Hansen¹

Human rape victims rarely show much sexual arousal and almost never achieve orgasm. It is conceivable that some aspects of women's capacity for orgasm evolved in the context of reducing the fertilizing capacity of rapists' ejaculates. That is, the absence of orgasm during rape may be an evolved response to rape.

(Thornhill & Palmer, 2000: 99)

Female scorpionflies have a suite of behaviors that appear to function in resisting forced copulation.

(Thornhill & Palmer, 2000: 98)

Thornhill and Palmer's (2000) *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* has been largely dismissed by critics (e.g. Zion, 2000), who have seized upon these authors' uncritical analogies between the "coercive" sexual behaviour of scorpionflies and waterstriders (amongst other insects) and the human crime of rape. However, by critically addressing only the more "outlandish" features of Thornhill and Palmer's text, the overlapping areas between this strong "evolutionary" position, and more acceptable "psychological" explanations of rape have been obscured. Close attention reveals that *A Natural History of Rape* draws on a number of common psychological tropes and constructs, which are no less complicit in their potential to exculpate by way of psychological explanation. Accordingly, this review will draw attention to a number of similarities between Thornhill and Palmer's "extreme" evolutionary explanations, and the exercise of psychological expertise more generally, in making sense of the phenomenon of rape.

The (Evolutionary) Psychology of the Rapist

Thornhill and Palmer employ both psychological and evolutionary justifications to bolster their contentious conclusion that under "certain conditions", all men are potentially rapists. Rape is a reproductive act that has come to exist - in potentia - within the male brain. In the strong version of their argument, rape is a direct adaptation, or outcome of natural selection that enables sexually disenfranchised men to procreate. Thus, rape falls under the category of "hardwired behaviour", and all men are "potential rapists".

To make this controversial conclusion more palatable, that is, to render the character of "men-in-general" normal, and non-threatening, despite this apparently damning generalization, Thornhill and Palmer argue that, in addition to this 'hardwired potential', all men also possess the ability to calculate a 'cost-benefit analysis' before raping. In so doing, they draw upon a combination of metaphors long established in the vocabulary of psychology. These concern notions of the "wild man within", and of the mechanisms that

undergird human behaviour. Such metaphors have become familiar bedfellows in scientific theories of human behaviour.

The metaphor of the “wild man within” has its roots in 19th century theories of human nature, and carries with it ethnocentric assumptions about how people would conduct themselves in the absence of the socializing regulations provided by (Western) civilization (Sarbin, 1990). More generally, mechanism is a guiding metaphor for science. The version of natural selection produced by Thornhill and Palmer is a hybrid of ideas about the underlying causes of human behaviour, an inner hardwired (yet dormant) “wild man within”, ideally controlled through systematic and mechanistic “cost benefit analysis”. Here, the language of evolutionary psychology borrows from the natural sciences and from economics to describe the operation of cognition. This rational, calculative process is presented as part of the cognitive machinery that exists to contain ever-present “natural” urges. This is a modern variant of the founding tropes of psychology (e.g. Freud, 1953), which neatly incorporates mechanistic and economic metaphors to make the risks posed by this “dormant natural dangerousness” amenable to, and manageable by psychological work.

Psychology and the Law

The 19th century also saw the beginnings of the intervention of psychiatry into law (Foucault, 1990). This “psychologization of crime” adjusted the focus of the judicial process, making it no longer acceptable simply to punish according to the act committed. Rather, it became necessary to work out why the perpetrator had committed their crime, in order to calculate the potential danger they posed to society.

According to Foucault, criminals were once simply those persons to whom crimes could be ascribed, and who could thus be punished. In the present-day system, crime is, instead, a behavioural manifestation or symptom of a (quantifiably) dangerous presence in the social body. This juridico-moral notion of a “dangerous individual” draws on notions of risk and predisposition, and requires a calculated and projective form of psychological expertise and management.

Rape has become a matter for both law and psychology. Defined according to the law, it is a matter of nonconsensual conduct: the violation of the free will of another. However, in laying claim to expertise in the (management of the) motivations of the rapist, psychology appropriates the conduct of the rapist as a matter for systematic psychological management. One way that this is achieved is by recuperating “nonconsensual” conduct as merely excessive. Excessive conduct is a manifestation of a deficiency in the exercise of free will, and free choice. Sex addiction is an extreme example of such an incurable, yet, treatable pathology of the will.

Once willpower has been quantified as (more or less) excessive, rather than as simply consensual or nonconsensual, it becomes amenable to systematic methods of behavioural control, or, more broadly, to technologies of the self (e.g., Rose, 1999). For evolutionary

psychology, and for Thornhill and Palmer in particular, this means that appropriate interventions should occur firstly at a pedagogic-therapeutic level, and should proceed to efficient self-management. They suggest that young men should be made aware of the evolutionary basis of their “natural urge to rape”, and should receive training on techniques of self-control to help manage these urges:

Completion of such a course might be required, say, before a young man is granted a driver’s license. Such a program might start by getting the young man to acknowledge the power of their sexual urges and then explaining why human males have evolved to be that way.

(Thornhill & Palmer, 2000: 179)

The form of power embodied by these psychological interventions is distinct from a model of power based on taboo, or the word of the law. The operations of this power are continual, as it is exercised through (self) examination and observation (Foucault, 1990). Thornhill and Palmer also suggest evolutionarily informed educational programs for young women. These would also have a focus on the evolved (and dangerous) sexuality of men, but would also emphasize their vulnerability, and at-risk status as women, and their responsibility to appear “unattractive” in order to avoid “situations conducive to rape”:

Young women should be made aware of the costs associated with attractiveness... and it should be made clear that, although sexy clothing and promises of sexual access may be means of attracting desired males, they may also attract undesired ones.

(Thornhill & Palmer, 2000: 181)

The (Evolutionary) Psychology of the Victim

Thornhill and Palmer argue that natural selection gives women their own “adaptation”: the “post rape trauma”. This ensures that attention is directed toward ways of dealing with current circumstances, and of avoiding a repetition of events that “caused” the trauma.

This hypothesis is also steeped in the naturalized metaphors of psychology. Notions of “mental illness” have long since ceased to appear “strange”, despite their conjoining of the abstract (mental) and the physical (illness) (Sarbin, 1990). Evolutionary psychologists make this amalgam more visible in arguing that:

The “significance of mental pain is analogous to the evolutionary importance of physical pain”...:In evolutionary history, raped women had increased fitness as a result of mental pain because the pain forced them to focus attention on the evaluation of the social circumstances that resulted in the sexual assault. Just as physical pain prompts an individual to avoid situations that may lead to similar injury, mental pain may cause women to consider circumstances that resulted in the pain more carefully and to avoid them in the future.

(Thornhill, 1996: 91)

The psychological pain that rape victims experience appears to be an evolved defense against rape (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000: 191). Not only is Thornhill and Palmer's theory complicit with societal attempts to allocate responsibility for being raped with the victim. Here, achieved most obviously via the stated responsibility of women to avoid those (agentless) "situations that might result in rape", they also (re)produce "post-rape trauma", a psychological disorder, as the source of an evolved and potentially beneficial "behavioural modification" for women.

The once popular disorder of "Rape Trauma Syndrome" has since been incorporated as part of a more contemporary pathology called "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" or PTSD. Foa and Olasov Rothbaum (1998) suggest that two major beliefs or dysfunctional cognitions underlie PTSD. First, that the world is an utterly dangerous place, and that people in general are untrustworthy. Second, that the victims themselves are unworthy and inadequate people because they were assaulted, or because they fail to recover and have persistent symptoms.

These "dysfunctional cognitions" are the focus of psychological treatment. By the logic of evolutionary psychology, however, they are both dysfunctional and productive. For Thornhill and Palmer, rape is a traumatic event for the victim primarily because of the loss of mate choice, or alienation of existing mates. Yet this trauma may also be productive in changing the behaviour of women who have "put themselves in situations conducive to rape". In contrast to the cost-benefit analysis, and self-management techniques required of men, the educational programs suggested for women and the therapeutic implications of this appropriation of "Rape Trauma Syndrome" as an evolutionary adaptation requires from women, a constant awareness and appraisal of risky situations or continual vigilance from the position of one always potentially endangered and violable.

In an evolutionarily informed post-rape counseling and treatment program for victims and their significant others, the counselors would ... inform the victim about cues that may increase the probability of rape, thus helping her avoid being raped again (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000: 188). Notably, the rape alluded to here by Thornhill and Palmer and by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, is limited to "stranger rape". Issues of domestic violence, or rape by one's "legitimately entitled mate" are excluded from consideration in both evolutionary psychology, and in the literature on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – as, until recently, was also the case in the legal system, where, despite the recognition of the possibility of "marital rape", a "hierarchy of harm" still exists, by which "stranger rape" is a more serious offence.

Gendered Technologies of the Self

Evolutionary psychological explanations of rape not only hold the potential to exculpate rapists, they also operate, as part of the psy-complex, to encourage the proliferation of differently gendered 'technologies of the self'. In describing appropriate self-management

techniques for men, Thornhill and Palmer substitute the terminology of cognitive psychology for that of the criminal: “getting away with it” becomes a “cost benefit analysis”, or a “reproductive calculus” involves a series of utterly normal calculations as to the relative risk to the self that would be posed by committing rape. Evolutionary psychology renders all men potentially rapists, and rape itself the product of a calculated “loss of control” which is a disorder of excessive conduct, or a deficiency in willpower. As a predisposition, this is not amenable to cure. Responsible male citizens are thus enjoined to constant self-vigilance and self-regulation of both inner urges and outer conduct as the only feasible strategy for securing the safety of the social body, and the rational self from the “wild man within”.

The evolutionary psychology of women advanced by Thornhill and Palmer also appropriates these themes of risk and predisposition. However, the gendered technologies of the self suggested here, of the avoidance of “dangerous situations”, and of “provocative attire”, render women ever vigilant and violable citizens at constant risk from dangerous others. Post-Rape Trauma Syndrome is argued to assist raped women to modify their “irresponsible” behaviour, through attention to the circumstances that “caused” the rape.

Evolutionary explanations of rape render rape the business of psychology. Rape comes to stand in as merely a behavioural manifestation of a “dangerous individual” within the social body. Evolutionary psychology suggests that this dangerous individual is present within every man, and that accordingly, every man must be skilled at rational self-management and control; and every woman at risk appraisal, and self-presentation as sexually unavailable. Sadly, these gendered technologies of the self are far from unique to evolutionary psychology, and may be located across the psy-complexes, in everyday culture, and in the courts, as part of the juridico-moral organisation of “dangerous” and “at risk” individuals.

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