

# *Human Biology*

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*Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*, by Jon Entine. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2000. ix + 387 pp. \$25.

Why do black athletes dominate sports? "The decisive variable is in our genes—the inherent differences between populations shaped over many thousands of years of evolution" (p. 4).

And why are we afraid to talk about it? Don't look now, but there's a conspiracy of postmodern professors bringing down a veil of silence on the question.

The main message of this book is presumably unintentional—that there is considerable value in the scientific study of human biology, the nature of which is widely underappreciated. The world of bogus conclusions about innate group-level differences based on uncontrolled experiments and loaded data samples has a long and distinguished ancestry, from Galton through Hooton's statistical crime comparisons, to David Buss's mate attractiveness comparison, *The Bell Curve*, and now, *Taboo*.

But there is something of an embarrassment for the book's title and central thesis, in that some of us have indeed been willing to engage the question. So the problem may not be that "we're afraid to talk about it," but simply that we're talking about it wrong, in the author's not-very-humble opinion.

One of the book's principal foils is sports sociologist Harry Edwards, who has certainly never been afraid to talk about it. Edwards emphasizes that there is a profound connection between talking about blacks as innately gifted athletes and talking about blacks as innately ungifted scholars. *Taboo* dismisses this connection as physiologically untenable, for there is no reason why you couldn't be both fast and smart.

The subtler point is elusive, however, and should be apparent to anyone who was conscious in 1995, when *The Bell Curve* was inescapable. And that is: if consistency of group performance and the achievements of the elite comprise an evidentiary standard for the innateness of *athletic* prowess, as *Taboo* argues, then it must also constitute an evidentiary standard for the innateness of *intellectual* prowess, as *The Bell Curve* argued.

The playing field is now level, both books tell us, and (to mix their metaphors) the cream has risen to the top.

But do we even know what the playing field is? Why does one kid become a boxer and another a doctor? That's a question for astrologers, not for scientists. Expectations, early tracking, ethnic or familial tradition, self-image, and of course opportunity, are all forces that work with the genetic endowment. Unless those variables are controlled, one simply cannot make a reasonable scientific case for the latter being the determining variable.

If anthropology has shown anything in this century, it's that a consistent observed group difference (from professional overrepresentation to skull shape) is not valid evidence of an innate basis for the difference. And the achievements of the few most extreme individuals are simply not a valid description of the population from which they are drawn.

The closest thing to scientific argument in the book is that in a black athlete and a white athlete, uncontrolled for any other life-history variables except maybe age, one had more "fast-twitch" fibers in a muscle biopsy than the other. But that's hardly credible support for a genetic argument about racial endowments.

Especially notable is what the book omits to make its case. Dominant nonblack athletes, like boxer Rocky Marciano or marathoner Grete Waitz, don't get a mention, and thus can't possibly be represented as racial paragons. The discussion of women in basketball doesn't include either Nancy Lieberman or Rebecca Lobo. The chapter on Jesse Owens omits the fact that his two Jewish teammates were not allowed to compete in their events at the 1936 Olympic Games in Munich, apparently in the belief that Hitler had already been sufficiently embarrassed by Owens. Jesse Owens became a sports idol; Marty Glickman became a sportscaster. The glorification of Michael Jordan as a black athlete is never matched by that of Mark Spitz or Sandy Koufax as Jewish athletes. Babe Didrikson's unparalleled crossover athletic virtuosity gets her a mention in a chapter on women athletes (and how they'll never be as good as men), but not as a white woman athlete.

*Taboo* thus exists in a universe of racialized lives and accomplishments, in which an athletic achievement is not the product of individual greatness, but merely a tally on a group scorecard. And in this universe of uncontrolled race experiments, there's only one group and only one scorecard—the black one.

Unfortunately, there's not much evidence that the author fully comprehends the business of race. Jon Entine explains that in the 1960s, "race" was abruptly replaced by "ethnicity" in social science jargon as a po-mo obfuscation, but he doesn't seem to get the point that "racial" issues were recognized to transcend biology—they were issues of equality, rights, opportunities, and prejudices. The same problems faced by the black "race" were also those faced by the Jewish, Irish, Italian, gay, Hispanic, and female nonraces. Talking about "race" in that context was the obscuring factor, for it made biology look like a key variable in what was properly a social and political discourse. "Ethnicity" was a way of preserving group membership and identity, as well as all the obvious cultural markers of speech, dress, diet, and body language, while keeping the focus on the common thread of prejudice and opportunity.

"Race" was revealed to be merely a vehicle for naturalizing inequality; for laying social and political evils at the foot of Mother Nature.

Alas, that's rather subtle for the present volume.

Most of *Taboo* is engaging. Most of it is also irrelevant to the book's central thesis, which is only developed in the last 100 pages or so. The first 250 pages range over such subjects as the cultural context of Kenyan long-distance running (hardly an argument for an innate superiority); the careers of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens; the dominance of Jews in basketball a few generations ago (also hardly an argument for innate superiority); and East German steroid doping. Some uncritical racialized pseudobiology is also offered: "mtDNA data indicate that from 5 to 27 percent of [northwest Africans'] genes are derived maternally while 59 percent is passed on paternally" (p. 114); "recent gene studies . . . show Ethiopians with a

genetic mixture of about 60 percent African and 40 percent Caucasian" (p. 115).

Ultimately the arguments in the book are so muddled that it is unclear just what the book is trying to say about race and athletics. Does the author think the very best blacks have a genetic advantage over the very best whites, that the average black has a genetic advantage over the average white, or that all blacks have the genetic potential to be better than all whites? All three propositions, of course, are unknowable and thereby metaphysical, but the first is trivial (for it says nothing about races or populations), the second statistically intractable (for how do you find the average?), and the third ridiculous (for its racial essentialism).

Entine writes very casually about the body build of the black athlete, but empirical data are the nemeses of essentialism: William (Refrigerator) Perry, Reggie White, Barry Sanders, Sammy Sosa, Ben Johnson, and Kobe Bryant all have very different body builds. Whatever common genetic-athletic thread they share is pretty obscure. Nor does he consider that the US Olympic committee was obliged to recruit NBA stars for its team, when previously only college players represented the US—because the rest of the world had seemingly caught up with our (genetically endowed?) black amateurs.

That elite athletes—or elite anybody—are in some sense constitutionally endowed with the ability to perform at a high level, can hardly be challenged. The interesting question, which *Taboo* never actually articulates, is the manner in which such genetic variation may be patterned.

The classical answer was that patterns of genetic variation respect social, political, and economic boundaries, such that different groups of people have detectably different genetic constellations. To the extent that such a hypothesis can be tested, it has failed miserably. Beginning with Ashley Montagu's arguments in the late 1940s, and culminating in Richard Lewontin's 1972 study and its subsequent replications, it seems as though the vast bulk of detectable genetic variation in the human species is within-group, not between-group, variation.

If genes for sports ability exist, then presumably they ought to follow the same pattern. If you don't think they do, then presumably there is a burden of proof of genetic research that falls upon you to demonstrate it. *Taboo* dismisses this with an imaginative paragraph about a different pattern in "the harder-to-study regulatory genes (that circumscribe our physical athletic abilities)" (p. 106). It's a classic antiempiricist argument—the genes I can study show me one thing, but I want to find another thing, so it must be caused by genes I can't study!

Of course, the genes you can't study can tell you pretty much anything. Consequently, this book is not about anything remotely scientific, but rather about folk heredity—discourses of natural variation and inequality that are not based on the science of genetics, but on deep-seated cultural ideologies.

Ultimately, light will only be thrown on racial issues by approaching them rigorously and circumscribing them carefully.

*Taboo* is thus not a step forward. The problem isn't *ontological*—whether blacks have sports genes or not, and the author is entitled to think they do—but *epistemological*—how we can know anything about sports genes with some degree of scientific rigor, which *Taboo* faces only obliquely, and then ultimately incompetently.

In other words, what would it take to establish that black athletes are really better endowed than white athletes from the zygote?

And the answer may be hard to swallow: well-controlled experiments and data, that begin by acknowledging the complexities of life histories, the poverty of rigorous data on the subject, the ease with which cultural stereotypes can be made to look like natural differences, and the difficulty in generalizing about the properties of populations from a comparison of the performances of their most outstanding members. Otherwise, you present a lot of interesting fluffy mush which doesn't make the point you advance—which is ultimately the problem of *Taboo*.

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