

## **RAMBLING NOTES FROM A ROVING RADICAL BEHAVIORIST: CLINTON, BUSH, SKINNER AND SOCIAL DETERMINISM**

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(Gentle reader: This essay relies on gratuitous, inflammatory political commentary to emphasize its scientific point.)

*My Favorite Peckerwood*  
The peckerwood pecked on the school house door.  
Pecked so hard 'til his pecker got sore.

From the old Folkways LP, *Prison Songs*, collected in the Mississippi prisons by the late Allan Lomax. Unfortunately the Sanitation Department removed it from the CD reissue, which I discovered when I was entertaining the fantasy of compiling a personal CD called *Peckerwood Blues*, because I have the collector's pathological compulsion not only to categorize but also to subcategorize, and I had to have a subcategory of the blues for white folks singing the blues. *Peckerwood* is an old, pejorative, southern African-American term for *white trash*.

I also have the pathological compulsion to Googleize every archaic term I fall in love with. But the only relevant citation I could find was a description of Bill Clinton as a peckerwood. And Clinton is absolutely my favorite Peckerwood president, if not my favorite president period. He impresses me for several reasons:

First, he so dramatically illustrates that men's brains are in their penises. Can you imagine risking the presidency and world security, not to mention marriage to one of the world's smartest, most articulate women, for fellatio by Monica Lewinsky? Marilyn Monroe, a favorite of other presidents, might be more understandable, but Monica Lewinsky?!

Now, it's easy to rationalize that Clinton is just a white-trash aberration and not representative of everyman. But before you make a desperate grab for that straw, consider some old research by David Barlow, where he hooked up a representative sample of red-blooded, freedom defending, American men by their manhood to a mechanical strain gauge, a plethysmograph, one that could measure

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penile tumescence from a subliminal 1% to an outrageous 100%. Then he showed them slides of nude females from the ages of adulthood to the age of four. And there was no age so young that the image of the nude female did not evoke significant movement on that plethysmograph, thereby revealing that all American men are latent pedophiles.

The Clinton case study and the Barlow experimental research also suggests to me that there is no such thing as a non-sexual, platonic relationship between a red-blooded American man and any female. For further elaboration on this suggestion, check out the CDs and DVDs of the standup routines (not the movies) of our country's most perceptive social analyst under the age of 67, Chris Rock—really.

Second, Clinton impresses me because he kept on trucking in spite of the greatest presidential humiliation since Watergate; not only was his judgment called into question but so was his taste. Any other person would have crawled under the sheets and hid there for a year. As former SNL social analyst, Denis Miller, pointed out, Clinton must have cahones the size of watermelons. What a man.

Third, ever since childhood I've been turned off by ALL politicians, because of their histrionic, hypocritical, chest-thumping hyperbole (aka BS). But Clinton is so straight, so sincere, so well-reasoned that I'd rather be lied to by Clinton than told the truth to by Bush, not that the latter event has ever happened.

(And, to digress briefly, when I see a crowd of yahoos desecrating our American flag by enthusiastically waving little replicas of that great flag during one of Bush's swaggeringly vacuous speeches, I become depressed thinking that we have become a nation of yahoos; and am inclined to agree with the ancient wisdom that, in a democracy, the people get the president they deserve. But the president we deserve may not be the president the whole world deserves.)

(And a little digression on the digression: I wonder if there has ever been a president of the United State whom so many people have hated so intensely. Maybe not the majority of our citizens, but a large and rabid minority. There's little as reinforcing as a good hate. And the reinforcing power of the emotional rush resulting from sharing that Bush hate in person, commentaries, articles, books, cartoons, and email jokes is suggested not only by the frequency of that behavior but especially by its intensity, its vehemence. It's almost as if we Bush haters hope he performs even greater atrocities on humankind, so we can get an even more reinforcing emotional rush, by being even more outraged.)

And finally, Clinton impresses me because he illustrates the extremely rare Abraham Lincoln ability to rise from white-trash, peckerwood obscurity to one of the 100 most powerful positions in this US of A, president of the USA, without having been born into the Harvard-Yale-Princeton power elite ala Bush and so many other presidents, but having worked his way into it, a blow for our side in the nature-nurture debate so recently activated by Richard Herrnstein.

### **SOCIAL DETERMINISM**

Herrnstein (1971) wrote an extremely interesting, thoughtful, insightful article on meritocracy in the USA. This was long before he dishonored the field of

behavior analysis with his biological-deterministic *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), wherein he justified the right-wing establishment's view of the appropriateness of the status quo, the current, extreme inequities in wealth and power, by saying those inequities resulted from the genetic inferiority of poor people and of people of color.

In the earlier article, Herrnstein argued that our society is a meritocracy where not only does the cream rise to the top, but it starts near the top from day one. (It was not until *The Bell Curve* that he argued this social determinism was, in turn, biologically determined.) And, today in search of the soul of Skinner's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, as I jogged through Harvard Square and the Harvard Commons, I reflected on the elite nature of Harvard, the intellectual home of both Herrnstein and Skinner. In truth, if you stacked all the IQ points in Cambridge end to end, they would reach from here to the other side of the universe, or at least to the moon.

In other words, Cambridge, MA may contain the world's greatest collection of extremely well-honed, effective repertoires (the professors) and effective repertoires in the honing (the students), at least the greatest per capita. Jogging through Harvard Commons (the park in the center of the university) and Harvard Square (the shopping district on the edge of the university), I didn't need no Dorothy to tell me that Toto and I were no longer in Kalamazoo and that the bookstore window I was staring through wasn't part of the Barnes and Noble chain.

The loser, mediocre, elite continuum fascinates me. What's the difference between Skinner and you and me? How'd he become Skinner, and why didn't we? What's the difference between us and the world's greatest experts? Skinner's peer group wasn't the members of ABA. We ABA members worship him, as well we should. But his peer group wasn't us; it was his world-class colleagues at Harvard. There are two different worlds, the one these world-class experts inhabit and the one we inhabit.

So how do you get to be a world-class expert? By working your butt off, according to the brilliant cognitive psychologist, Anders Ericsson (e.g., Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Ten thousand hours of deliberate, well focused, thoughtful practice will turn you into a world-class expert, whether that expertise is in music, sports, dance, chess, science, or politics. And Ericsson's research suggests you can only do about 20 hours of this intense work per week. Therefore most world-class experts start when they're little kids, a few hours a week. By the time they're in their early 20's they've upped it to 20 per week and accumulated their 10,000. But it ain't easy. Many children (maybe most) burn out along the way, because their parents didn't manage to program the deliberate practice humanely enough or to inculcate the Jewish-mother values needed to maintain such a rigorous regimen. And, yes, the parent's and other caretaker-trainers are crucial. Kids don't embark on 10,000 hours of hard, deliberate practice on their own. And even if they did, they'd need expert coaches and trainers along the way, whether those experts were parents or professionals or, more typically, a

combination of parents and professionals. Ericsson says that at least one of the parents must devote their life to nurturing the budding expert, and I would add: nurturing with wisdom, thoughtfulness, and high, demanding, guilt-inducing Jewish-mother intensity, though not so much that the kid burns out and rebels.

But that's asking a lot of the parents. They must have the resources to afford the luxury of nurturing a budding genius. But poor folks don't have that luxury and equally bad, they don't have the skills. The problem is that, contrary, to what we romantic, liberal, democracy-loving Americans would like to believe, everything positive is correlated with wealth; the wealthier you are, the healthier you are, the smarter you are, the less likely you are to get into spousal abuse or child neglect, the less likely you are to be obese, smoke cigarettes, not floss your teeth, not buckle up, etc.

Of course, what we'd like to say is that them poor folks just don't have the resources immediately available that we rich and semi-rich folks have. But it's worse than that. When the resources are available, the poor folks don't make good use of them. You can fill a peckerwood's medicine cabinet with dental floss, and he still ain't going to floss. At the university, we provide all sorts of extra support for students in academic difficulty (e.g., we provide tutorials); and who shows up for the tutorials, the academic-probation kids from the trailer park? No, the high-IQ, high-GPA rich kids from the suburbs, whose Jewish mothers have filled them with the fear that, if they don't proactively grab every opportunity for self-improvement, they themselves will end up in the trailer park or in a van down by the river, and worse yet, be a humiliation to their Jewish mothers who have sacrificed so much for them. The problem is that not only do the poor folks not have the resources, they also don't have the Jewish-mother-induced self-management skills needed to make the extra effort to use those resources.

So it's a vicious spiral, the rich get smarter, then they get richer, then they get smarter, etc. And the poor get flushed down the toilet. The smart rich kids go to Harvard and become still smarter and richer. And even if we don't live in a trailer park in Kalamazoo, Michigan, even if we live in the middle-class suburbs of Kzoo, we don't live in Cambridge and we never will. Though we deny it, the United States is a highly stratified, social-class society.

Another way to put it is that the rich are richer than the rest of us, because they are smarter and they work harder. And how hard you work isn't just measured in terms of the number of hours you log in, but also the quality of the work. To work carefully, thoughtfully, strategically, in a continuous-quality-improvement, self-improvement mode is many times harder than just logging in the hours doing the job. But when the world-class experts work, it's that thoughtful, high quality work that they do.

And when they aren't working, world-class experts are still working: When I drive from Kzoo to ABA in Boston, most of my head time is devoted to ruminations about my latest social disaster, as, like so many of us mediocre people, I'm easily susceptible to the distracting seduction of the emotional reinforcers of self-pity. But, if one of them world-class experts were driving from Harvard to

Kzoo, he'd be head-writing his next *Psych Review* article, or maybe his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize. And that's the difference between WMU and Harvard.

### EXCEPTIONS

But for me, exceptions don't prove the rule; they just force more nuanced applications of the rule. How is it that Bill Clinton was Abraham-Lincolned from his little Arkansas, peckerwood shack, through a Rhodes Scholarship, to elitist Oxford to a law degree from elitist Yale (where he worked two or three jobs at a time to pay the bills), to President of these United States of America. (Note that I put the preceding sentence in passive voice, to suggest that Clinton's amazing rise to the presidency did not result from his innate qualities, but rather the rise was done to him, by an amazing set of behavioral contingencies that gave him the repertoire and values that caused him to rise to the presidency.) I don't know what those contingencies were, but I wish I did, and I'm sure they were there.

Skinner was another exception. His amazing rise was from a middle-class home in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, to a PhD from elitist Harvard, to a professorship at elitist Harvard, and to the creation of behavior analysis, the most important, most valuable, most right-on school of thought in the history of psychology. Maybe not as amazing as Clinton's trip, but amazing enough for me. Again, I don't know what those contingencies were, but I wish I did, and I'm sure they were there. (Unfortunately, his autobiography didn't reveal those contingencies, at least not to me.)

And Bush was still another exception. His was a descent from a rich, politically successful family in New Haven, Connecticut, through a prep school where his greatest accomplishment was to be head cheerleader for the intramural stickball league, to a mediocre performance at elitist Yale, where his admission was no doubt facilitated by the fact that both his father and grandfather had attended there, to an MBA from elitist Harvard, to the presidency of the USA, of which it has been said that blaming Bush for the national and world-wide disasters his presidency has created is like blaming Mickey Mouse for problems at Disney Land, of which it has also been said that Bush would make a great president, a president of a fraternity where he would decide who should go out for another keg of beer.

Clinton and Skinner's rise to world-class prominence is amazing because it contradicts the social determinism that prevents extreme upper mobility for most of the rest of us. And Bush's descent to trailer-trash, chest-thumping, inarticulate bullying is amazing because it contradicts the social determinism that prevents extreme downward mobility for most of the rest of us. In other words, our social class determines (or at least is correlated with) the skills and values we acquire. And those skills and values rarely allow us to move more than a level or two in either direction from the social class where we acquired them.

### MOLECULAR ANALYSIS

I've known many of the most productive scholars in ABA and all thirty presidents of ABA. And, by and large, they blow me away. They greatly impress me with their intellectual and behavior-analytic skills and their consistent industriousness. And I bow before them. They are great and our membership is great. But there ain't no Skinners among us. ABA's full of members trying to go beyond Skinner. And many members, including me, spend time trying to correct a few details we think Skinner got wrong. But there ain't no Skinners among us.

To use a cliché, Skinner produced a paradigm shift in psychology. Yeah, of course, he had his progenitors, but it was Skinner who built on their works to produce the paradigm shift. It was Skinner who produced this whole new, powerful worldview, this intellectual framework that allows us to ask and have a fighting chance of answering all the questions about the nature of man.

Now here's my question, here's the point of this meandering essay: What was the nature of Skinner that allowed (caused) him to create this marvelous worldview? What was his genius? What was his world-class repertoire and values? What made him so different from you and me?

I understand that he was more or less always on task, always working, always jotting down intellectual notes which he'd file and then later retrieve when needed. And constant note taking is a mildly effortful pain in the butt, just enough of a pain to prevent most of us from doing it, even in cases of extremely obvious need, let alone as a routine, intellectual-management activity.

And I understand that the aging Skinner complained that he could no longer outline an entire book in his head. While I don't have much sympathy for him, because I can't even outline a postcard in my head, I think we should all be intrigued by the question of what is a molecular analysis of the skills or repertoire involved in covertly outlining a whole book. And once we've done a task analysis, how could we explicitly teach it. And once we succeed in formally teaching these wonderful head skills, how did Skinner and other intellectual giants like him acquire those head skills in their natural environment, in hick villages like Susquehanna, Pennsylvania?

Behavior analysis is wonderful. And we've made wonderful progress since Skinner's *Behavior of Organisms* (1938). But we've barely cracked the surface. We haven't really gotten into Skinner's head. We haven't really gotten into anybody's head. We have barely begun to do a molecular behavior analysis of functional intellectual repertoires. We have barely begun to make our behaviorism Skinner's radical behaviorism. Let's get cracking; maybe the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of behaviorism; so maybe we can make the 21<sup>st</sup> century the century of radical behaviorism.

### CAVEAT

Of course, all of this is just my humble opinion. And I might be wrong; but probably not.

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