

Book Reviews

Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It by Jon Entine, (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2000, pp. 375. Reviewed by Brian Wilson, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.

Critical sociological work has generally dismissed claims that natural race-based differences account for the superior performance of Black athletes in many sports. In most cases, either the validity of studies supporting the “nature thesis” is disputed, or the problems associated with even raising questions about natural differences are highlighted. As Lapchick has argued:

We have spent six decades since Jesse Owens trying to prove scientifically there's some difference between black and white athletes to explain [the Black athlete's] succeeding dominance to the point it is today...There's never been one study to prove the racial theory in sport. the fact we try to prove it is a reflection we are uncomfortable in white-dominated society. We need some explanation, so we can accept they [Blacks] are better physical specimens, while we contend we [Whites] are intellectual.¹



In his book *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*, Jon Entine challenges these premises. On one hand, he proposes that there is an abundance of evidence, both scientific and anecdotal, showing that the dominance of Black athletes in elite level sport is attributable, at least in part, to supe-

rior genes (p. 8). On the other hand, Entine argues that ‘race-related difference’ is a topic worthy of discussion, contending that the first step toward bridging divisions between blacks and whites (and ultimately celebrating their individuality) is to acknowledge that there are differences (p. 10). Entine’s rationale for studying black and white differences in sport is that “athletic competition...offers a definitiveness that eludes most other aspects of social life,” and, for this reason, “is a perfect laboratory for such an exploration” (p. 10).

Following his introduction, Entine’s argument is developed through a series of interconnected sections, beginning with “Part 2 - The Evidence” where he demonstrates the dominance of Black athletes in various sports, examines the successes of athletes of West African heritage in sports requiring speed and power, and outlines the incredible achievements of athletes from East Africa in endurance sports (particularly those from the Rift Valley region in Kenya). “Part 3: History of Race Science and Sports” includes an overview of the origins of race science, a survey of theories of evolution, and a discussion of how these theories are pertinent to current understandings of racial difference in sport performance. “Part 4: Segregation and Integration of Sports” includes profiles of some Black pioneers in major sports, a summary of the emergence of “Eugenetics” as an attempt to link race and intelligence, the story of Jesse Owens in relation to both the 1936 Berlin Olympics and American racism, and a discussion of Jewish dominance of basketball in the 1920s and 30s.

“Part 5: Nature or Nurture,” describes the integration of minorities into major sports, discusses how sports became a place for race-based protest, and examines issues surrounding the problematic link between intelligence and race. The section concludes with chapters entitled “Winning the Genetic Lottery” and “The Environmentalist Case Against Black Superiority in Sports,” where Entine revisits and reinforces his ‘pro-nature’ case, while refuting skeptics who he believes naively maintain that environment/culture is the sole determinant of sport performance. The book closes with a rationale for relying upon ‘reasonable’ scientific standards in evaluating the evidence in this debate.

To Entine’s credit, the book is well-written and contains several interesting stories about and depictions of historical events and cultural groups (sport-related and otherwise). He is attentive to the development of Black participation in sport from the early 20th century and equally mindful of the broader social context for these developments. He makes reference to all relevant topics in the debate about athletic superiority and race, and provides painstaking details about *some* of these topics (e.g., the patterns of Black domination in certain sports).

However, the strengths of Entine’s endeavour are sullied by his selective, partial, and deceptive use of “scientific evidence,” and his problematic claims about what Taboo will contribute to debates about race. First, a close look at Entine’s use of “science” reveals that he selectively critiques existing research, and rarely identifies the criteria he uses to assess studies. In some instances, he provides overviews and pointed critiques of research, while at other times he uncritically accepts studies that appear to confirm his point. For example, in his description of Tanner’s research on the physique and body composition of athletes who participated in track and field events at the 1960 Olympics, Entine highlights the finding that “Blacks with West African ancestry had a range of anatomical characteristics that contributed to their excellence in jumping and sprinting while hindering them in endurance events such as

the marathon” (p. 248).² Although Entine notes that Tanner’s sample included only fifteen “Black” athletes, twelve of whom traced their ancestry to West Africa, he absolves Tanner by pointing out that these “findings have been confirmed again and again” and that Tanner’s conclusions matched “racial studies done before and since” (p. 248-249). In this example, we are left to wonder what standards guided Entine’s assessment of research methods, and how reputable these other studies are that he alludes to but does not reference.

In contrast, he is intensely critical of studies/commentaries that contradict his “nature” thesis. In one instance, he evaluates a study (by Hunter) that compared the “laboratory performance and real world performance” of a sample of black and white subjects - a study that, according to Entine, is often cited by those who refute the nature thesis.³ Entine emphasizes the study’s finding that the black group had a significantly lower percentage of body fat, while arguing that “a statistical manipulation called Analysis of Covariance” used to adjust the data based on the higher amount of body fat of the white subjects essentially “washed away” any performance differences that existed in favour of the black subjects (p. 252). For Entine, this study was an example of research that has been wrongly used to discount biological/genetic differences. To be fair, his critique of the study (in isolation from the implications he draws from it) makes sense. However, the reader is left to wonder how the research Entine uses to *support* his argument would stand up to a similar level of scrutiny? We cannot know from this book.

In another instance, Entine discredited an article that critiqued the “nature” thesis because the author of the piece, renowned Black activist and academic Harry Edwards, was believed to be fulfilling a political agenda. As Entine explained:

[In his critique of a *Sports Illustrated* article that linked race-related physical differences with the superior athletic performance of Blacks], Edwards was motivated by more than just casual concern with sloppy thinking. As an outspoken black power advocate, he was especially hit by the *Sports Illustrated* piece...In “The Myth of the Racially Superior Athlete” [Edwards article], a polemic in the guise of an academic article, Edwards dissected the airiness of some of the anthropometric evidence cited [in the SI article], challenged the Middle Passage theory that the hardest slaves survived the Atlantic crossing to eventually breed super athletes, and ridiculed as “ludicrous as even a common sense assumption” the conjecture that blacks might be genetically primed to handle pressure better than whites. But Edwards’ real target was not sports but...the perceived inverse link between sports performance and intelligence (p. 237).

Although Edwards may indeed have a hidden agenda driving his academic work, Entine still allows Edwards’ “concern with sloppy thinking” to fall to the wayside in favour of attacks on Edwards’ motives in writing a critique at all. What about Edwards’ critique of the evidence in the *Sports Illustrated* article - an article that Entine uncritically describes and then open-handedly endorses a page earlier (p. 236)? Ironically, the reader could also question the ideological subtext of Entine’s work - work that is critical of some studies based on scientific merit, and others on the basis

of an author's political agenda, while other studies that support his thesis are less rigorously critiqued.

In other instances, research findings that were deemed inconclusive or interpreted in "politically correct" ways by the scientists who conducted the studies were given a 'pro-nature' spin by Entine. For example, Entine re-interpreted a study by Cobb that examined the link between race-related physiological differences and athletic performance, a study that was viewed by Cobb himself as unconvincing and pseudo-scientific.⁴ Entine argued that Cobb's findings were "far more intriguing than his pronouncements might suggest," and were, in fact, consistent with the beliefs of "several scientists," and akin to other "tests [that have] since suggested that Blacks with West African ancestry, such as African Americans, on average have quicker reflexes than whites" (p. 177). Left underdeveloped here are issues to do with: the criteria used to reinterpret the findings; the identity of the several scientists Entine refers to; and the standards guiding Entine's evaluation of these other "tests" that he used to confirm his reading of Cobb's results.⁵

In another instance, Entine rationalizes his tendency to talk about the genetics of the nebulous group labeled "North American Black" by pointing out that "although North American Blacks do contain a significant percentage of non-African genes, it is far less than popular estimates that range as high as 30 percent" (p. 99). He goes on to argue that two hundred years of racial interbreeding "would not be enough time to wash away all of the genes that are distinct to each population - including, for example, the genes that influence athletic performance" (p. 99). What is particularly troubling here is the suggestion that because North American Blacks contain fewer non-African genes than most estimates suggest, we are safe to generalize about the genetic make-up of all dark skinned North Americans who might be called "Black," and, moreover, about the athletic ability of those who possess these unidentified genes.

When scientific arguments do not tell the whole story, Entine appeals to the reader's "common sense," suggesting that "a dispassionate inquirer would have to suspect that there are a host of intertwined cultural and genetic explanations for black athletic success" (p. 328), while pointing out that "ideology can sometimes overwhelm common sense" (p. 339). To support these kinds of assertions, Entine sometimes cites the opinions of athletes (e.g., p. 4, p. 246, p. 272), who, with few exceptions, explain how in their experience and opinion, Blacks are "naturally" superior athletes. The problem with this presentation is that "common sense" arguments are sometimes little more than superficial interpretations of complex phenomenon (and are integral to problems related to stereotyping), while the use of personalities (celebrities) to seemingly promote a point-of-view seems to destabilize the scientific base of the argument (that Entine wants to stand on).

It is important to note that Entine anticipates criticisms related to his use of "science." In one instance, he suggests that many scientists will not be satisfied with any arguments supporting the "nature" thesis because "specific genes cannot yet be directly linked to sport specific skills." Entine contends that these critics erect "near impossible standards" and have "set up a straw man [e.g., Entine] by demanding a smoking gun" (p. 288). In one section called "Science on Trial," he refers to some compelling critiques of the science behind genetic explanations of racial difference, citing skeptics who emphasize the selective, seductive, destructive, and unjustified underpinnings of much of this work (p. 332-333). However, he does not specifically

respond to these arguments and, in fact, returns later in the same chapter to his view that “the scientific evidence for black superiority is overwhelming” and that the evidence “speaks for itself” (p. 341).⁶

My second argument is with Entine’s view that *Taboo* will break the silence surrounding the topic of natural athletic superiority, thus reducing racial tension and helping us celebrate our individuality. My concern here is two-fold. On the one hand, Entine never adequately explains why interrogating the potential genetic basis of athletic performance is somehow going to lead to increased racial tolerance. His rationale that “athletic competition...offers a definitiveness that eludes most other aspects of social life” and for this reason is a useful “access point” for examining why “blacks and whites have such a difficult time acknowledging our differences” (p. 10) is never adequately pursued, is vague and open-ended, and appears to be pure speculation.

On the other hand, and while Entine is right to assert that open discussion about sensitive topics is necessary, he seems unaware of the various and unintended ways that audiences interpret and use media, *regardless of the intentions of the media producers*.⁷ A testament to this concern is that infamous Canadian academic Phillippe Rushton, who is renowned for his scientifically flawed arguments that attempt to link intelligence with racial background and brain size, has selectively and irresponsibly integrated Entine’s position into his perspective.⁸ Specifically, Rushton used Entine’s work to justify the contention that “intelligence [is] linked to brain size, which affects[s] the pelvis shape of mothers trying to push out clever babies with big heads,” which, in turn, means that babies with the biggest heads will have the “oddest shaped legs,” which will eventually hinder running speed.⁹ As Carrington points out, this logic leads to a scenario where “we apparently get clever Asians [with big heads] who can’t run, blacks with little heads, and therefore low IQs, but good skeletal shapes for running - with whites, of course, the norm in the middle from which we can measure the ‘deviant’ performance of the non-white ‘races’ of the world.”¹⁰ To be fair, Entine refutes the ‘IQ and athleticism’ link in his book. Still, Rushton’s comments underscore the naïveté of Entine’s claims about *Taboo’s* contributions to racial tolerance.

In conclusion, I suggest that Entine’s work should be viewed as a challenge, following Hoberman, to respond to this sort of pseud-science “in a more combative way by scrutinizing the claims of racist science on the most detailed level, by forcing both lay and professional audiences to confront the ambiguous status of most laboratory-generated evidence about biomedical racial differences; and by focusing relentlessly on the social and historical factors that shape what we see as human biology.”¹¹ The hope is that such rigorous criticism might help ameliorate the impacts that Entine’s grandiose claims could have on audiences who do not read the book but hear about its “findings,” or for those who might be more sympathetic to Entine’s appeal to “common-sense.” In the end, *Taboo* might be enjoyed by those who uncritically accept his arguments and/or those who are drawn into a book that is well-written, historically interesting, and at times anecdotally driven. Indeed, Entine should be given credit for trying to dispel take-for-granted assumptions about race. However, his efforts would have been better saved if he had more effectively accounted for his similarly taken-for-granted assumption about how and where to use “science” in this endeavour.

Endnotes

1. Richard Lapchick, founder of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, quoted in J. Christie's article "Book tackles race as factor in success," in *The Globe and Mail*, 16 December 1996, p. C16.
2. J. Tanner, *The physique of the Olympic Athlete: A study of 137 track and field athletes at the XIV Olympic games, Rome, 1960* (London, UK: G. Allen and Unwin, 1964).
3. D. Hunter, *A comparison of anaerobic power between Black and White adolescent males*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University (1988).
4. W. Cobb, "Race and Runners," *Journal of Health and Physical Education*, (January, 1939): 54.
5. Elsewhere, Entine suggests that there is "intriguing data in support of the stereotype that blacks [in sport] are more relaxed than whites" but provides only uncritical descriptions of preliminary and inconclusive research to support this argument (pp. 265-266).
6. Moreover, this claim that the "evidence speaks for itself" contradicts work on the politics of science and the sociology of knowledge (c.f., P. Berger, & T. Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1971).
7. Consider, for example, Jhally and Lewis' research on *the Cosby Show*, a previously top-rated television sitcom featuring portrayals of a responsible, educated, wealthy, respected African American family (a show believed by many to dispel negative stereotypes about Blacks). Based on small group interviews with various racial groups, the researchers explained that for some white audiences, the show reinforced a view that the "American Dream" is alive and well (i.e., that opportunities are *equally* available to all members of society - a claim harshly critiqued by scholars who study social inequality in the United States). The authors termed this "enlightened racism." See S. Jhally, & J. Lewis' *Enlightened racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).
8. For a useful outline of the concerns, see John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York, NY: Mariner, 1997).
9. See *Black Britain*, BBC2, September 2000, quoted in B. Carrington's "Letter to *Index on Censorship*" <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/>. (2001-forthcoming). Carrington's letter is a critical response to a letter by Entine in an earlier issue of the journal.
10. Ibid.
11. Quoted in Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport has Damaged Black Amer-*

