'Social Animal' analyzes human behavior

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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A columnist for The New York Times and commentator for "The News Hour on PBS," David Brooks is every liberal's favorite conservative. Smart, sensible and sedate, he is not a free market, anti-tax, small government ideologue. He supports gay marriage and abortion rights. He has, on occasion, praised Barack Obama.

"The Social Animal" is an ambitious extension of Brooks' previous work on suburbia ("On Paradise Drive") and affluence in America ("Bobos in Paradise"). A good "organic" conservative, heir to David Hume and Edmund Burke, Brooks maintains, as he searches for the causes for success and failure, that social connections, cultural conventions and communal institutions are more potent than policies based on (the erroneous) premise that human beings are rational, utility-maximizing machines, whose behavior can be controlled by carrot-and-stick incentives.

The book is filled with arresting information drawn from scholarly studies in neuroscience, evolutionary biology, psychology and behavioral economics. By the time they are 4 years old, Brooks indicates, kids in poor families have heard 32 million fewer words than their counterparts in professional families.

Although people everywhere are loyal to their kin, he reveals that 95 percent of Asians and Hispanics, but only about one-third of Dutch and Danish respondents, agree that one must love and respect one's parents, regardless of their faults.

An equal opportunity satirist, Brooks skewers the rich and (occasionally) famous. In Aspen, he writes, "superbuff Spandex seniors," looking like "little iron Raisinettes," whiz by much younger bikers. In their quest for eternal youth, they "strategize about energy shakes, veggie-centric cuisine and bone marrow preservation," while marrying beauties to ensure that while their grandmothers resembled Gertrude Stein their granddaughters will look like Uma Thurman.

Concerned, perhaps, that a narrative grounded in academic research might get too dry, Brooks structures his book around an account of the lives of Harold and Erica, a fictional couple. It's a mistake. Harold and Erica are stick figures, stand-ins for this and that American more or moral. And the narrative gets in the way of a more sustained analysis of Brooks' themes.

Brooks is right, of course, that - even for CEOs and chaired professors - intuitions, biases, stored memories, drives and needs have a greater impact on belief and behavior than rational calculations, and that "none of us exists, self-made, in isolation" from the genetic, familial and cultural contexts into which we were born.

He does not, however, provide a compelling explanation of the relationship between conscious and unconscious thought - or of the role of reason, which he is too quick to devalue - in triggering "which inner self" will dominate behavior.

"The Social Animal," alas, does not improve all that much on the assessment, made almost 300 years ago, by Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan philosopher. We can will what we choose, lifting a left arm or walking to church, Edwards observed. But we do not know nearly enough about how - and why - we choose what we choose. Or, I might add, about how those choices might be subject to review and improvement.

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Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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