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Trends. Evolutionary Theories, Iceland, and An Opportunity It Can't Refuse

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A major Swiss pharmaceutical company plans on investing in Icelandic deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). The idea is that since most citizens of Iceland are biologically related to each other, Iceland is in essence a nation of relative clones. Genetic mapping of Icelanders--arriving at the Icelandic genome as the exemplar of the human genome--coupled with study of Icelandic medical records may well allow detection of the genetic factors in any particular disease. Or so is the publicly-transmitted rationale.

This business venture has met with some criticism. For example, there are fears of eugenics--identifying individuals at risk and sterilizing them or otherwise preventing their attempts at reproduction or even killing them. There are Luddite concerns about biotechnology as well as religious and spiritual concerns about delving into matters that might contaminate the soul or violate sound ethics. The more jaded opponents of the venture have pointed to the financial consequences for Iceland--approximately $200 million for starters--as fueling motives to propagandize notional benefits. And some supporters of the venture have been attacked for positing that the genetic sources of psychological and behavioral phenomena spawning political conflict and violence could be identified, isolated, and expunged from the human genome--positing that is based on the misperception of genetic primacy over social behavior.

The sophisticated reader will no doubt note that some matters of basic science and applied social science are missing from the above. First, many diseases with significant genetic substrates also appear to be matters of lifestyle--induced through psychological preference and social and cultural coercion. Others are significantly matters of political geography and socioeconomic want--e.g., most infectious diseases. Most importantly, both supporters and opponents of the business venture discount--perhaps for their own political purposes--the genetic-environmental interaction characterizing an individual's ontogenetic and phylogenetic history. Is such discounting itself an evolved psychological mechanism contributing to adaptation, a mere adaptive by-product, or random behavioral noise? And will study of the Icelandic genome isolate such a genetic magic bullet? We think not. (See Brannigan, A. (1997). Self-control, social control and evolutionary psychology: Towards an integrated perspective on crime. Canadian Journal of Criminology, 39, 403-431; de Jong, H.L., & Van der Steen, W.J. (1998). Biological thinking in evolutionary psychology: Rockbottom or quicksand? Philosophical Psychology, 11, 183-205; Mawer, S. (January 23, 1999). Iceland, the nation of clones. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Nicholoson, N. (1997). Evolutionary psychology: Towards a new view of human nature and organizational psychology. Human Relations, 50, 1053-1078.) (Keywords: Biotechnology, Evolution, Genetics, Iceland.)