

Book Review: *The Social Animal*

By Ken Andersen

The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement by David Brooks (Random House, 2011) is a valuable addition to an academic's bookshelf. This is not a "novel" to be read either in haste or as a specialized scientific treatise. Rather, it is a rich exploration of the arc of two fictional persons, husband and wife, from childhood to the death of one utilizing the research of many disciplines, notably research on the brain, psychology and sociology.

David Brooks is likely to be known by most readers as a significant op-ed columnist in the *New York Times*. He also has a weekly commentary on the PBS NewsHour and published two previous books that are not unlinked to the current one.

Brooks draws upon an astonishing range of studies and resources—26 pages of notes—as he illumines the forces that shape the lives of his fictional characters, Harold and Erica. He begins with the parents of the two as a basis for the differentiated personalities of his characters. Harold comes from a more traditional background, Erica a merger of an Asian mother with mental and addiction problems and a largely absent Mexican-American father, parents who never married. The different backgrounds provide the opportunity to show the significant influences of differing backgrounds on the trajectory of lives: ambitions, needs, personalities in the context of the society.

The marriage is not without its conflicts. Erica is the more driven personality: she fights at an early age to get into a school that will not accept her. She establishes a successful business that ultimately fails. After working for a large company, rising in the ranks, she becomes involved in a political campaign and earns a significant role in the White House. Harold works independently after being involved in her business and ultimately ends up working in a DC "think tank." Upon retirement, they work part-time taking small groups on tours that Harold researches and leads. The saga closes with Harold's death as his final moments are a coda in a chapter titled "Meaning."

Brooks writes as if omnisciently inside the minds of his characters: their emotions, biases, intuitions, needs, efforts to understand the pattern of their lives. He covers an amazing range of the possibilities in life from Erica's meaningless one-night sexual encounter late in her marriage, the difficulties of understanding one another, coping with the external world to the realities of old age and dying.

There are many sections worthy of re-reading, in part to challenge one's own view of things. The chapters dealing with "Intelligence" and "Choice Architecture" are particularly interesting as the limits of IQ are examined and rationality seen as bounded by emotion to a degree we simply do not fathom. Throughout the book, I found myself lingering over particular phrases, statements or quotations that encapsulated so precisely a point made: "the patois of globalony"(313); "Statecraft is inevitably soulcraft"(323); and "from Daniel Patrick Moynihan: 'The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.'"(321)

Every reader will identify particular sections or chapters as particularly rich depending on one's place in the life cycle. My favorite chapter is "The Soft Side," focusing upon the reality of today's Washington, DC. While his selection of items may be caustic, they are the today's reality. Brooks is particularly trenchant in his analysis of the political divide of today. Both major political parties endorse individualism. For the right it is the individualism of the market: "nothing must impinge on economic choice."(324) For the left, "Liberals embraced the individualism of the moral sphere."(325) He decries the economic/materialistic mind-sets that characterize both views as each side uses economic explanations. Brooks calls for reading not just Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, but also Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Brooks sees a need for a return to a social contract built on trust and law and order in the community as the key to economic well-being. He stresses the urgency of a strong social fabric: in its absence "politics becomes polarized." He holds politicians and "media polemicists" responsible for turning "parties into cults, demanding and rewarding complete loyalty to the tribe."(319) Strong connections in family and community are the essential basis for moving from family to local community, state, and nation as part of the social contract. Clearly Brooks sees the need for a moral basis for action in individual lives and

collectively.

Brooks rightly notes Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. I wish he had drawn upon John Rawl's brilliant analysis in *A Theory of Justice* to exemplify what has gone awry in the economic life of the nation. But he draws upon Aristotle, Plato, Kafka, Pascal, Lincoln, Milton, Marx et al. as well as a large number of researchers. I would be derelict if I failed to note the excellent index that enables one to move directly to a specific issue.

Brooks offers a well-researched, thoughtful take on our contemporary society to argue our lives are much more controlled by the unknown functioning of our mind in prompting and directing conscious thought and action than we realize. At times, he may put too much weight on a particular study or approach which others may challenge. But this is a particularly rich book if one chooses to joust with one or another idea or study cited. I recommend *The Social Animal* as being well worth spending time with it.