

Biohistory

by Jim Penman

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Biohistory as a discipline started in the late 19th century and has gained steadily in popularity more recently. In general, biohistory combines several different schools and disciplines such as the Annales school (Braudel), environmental history, human geography, sociobiology, and, in some manifestations, the theories of Darwin; basically, biohistory is a type of social history. Biohistory differs from evolutionary biology in that the emphasis of the former is on history, not science.

Jim Penman is now one of the major proponents of the study of Biohistory. The volume under review is the full academic version of a more popularizing book *Biohistory: Decline and Fall of the West*. Both volumes examine, in more or less detail, how the “complex interplay between culture and biology has shaped civilisations from the Roman Empire to the modern West.”

In extreme synthesis, the focus of the book is that the driving forces of history are the biological characteristics of individual people. Several characteristic types are identified and Penman calls the types by various letters. For example, C is “a physiological system that adjusts behaviour to conditions of limited food... Characteristics of C in humans include hard work, discipline, and willingness to sacrifice present consumption for future benefit.” Instead the V characteristic is formed by plentiful food but with episodic severe stress. The V person is aggressive, with a strong sense of group, intolerance of indulgence, migration, etc. The relationship between C and V explains the rise and fall of civilization. Penman then delineates a variety of factors that affect how these categories evolve through time in society.

Seventeen chapters plus a very useful glossary in the academic version cover all the principles of the Penman’s approach to world development through time, in an attempt to understand why some societies are wealthier than others, why some groups within society are at a disadvantage, and the reasons for war and economic recessions. He addresses questions such as whether birth rates decline in affluent societies, and why does democracy exist in some countries but not in others? What causes certain peoples to rise to power and prominence and why do civilizations fall? All of these questions are answered from the point of view that changes in social, political, and economic behaviour reflect changes in temperament. Temperament/character is a highly variable behavioural and emotional state in individuals, but over time it is relatively stable, biologically based, and appears early in life. Temperament/character is influenced by parenting style and environmental variables which condition how the inherited temperament/character is expressed (pp. 1–2).

Specific topics covered by the chapters include a discussion of science and temperament (Chap. 1), of food restriction and the effects on populations (Chap. 2), the ‘C’ or civilization factor

(Chap. 3), and aggression (Chap. 4). Infancy and childhood are discussed in chapter 5, and the evolution of Western society is the subject of chapter 6. Several “cycles” are discussed with numerous examples, e.g., the civilization cycle (Chap. 7), the lemming cycle (chap. 8), war (Chap. 9), and recession and terror (Chap. 10). The remaining chapters discuss the application of the cycles to specific events, such as why regimes fall (Chap. 11), Rome (Chap. 12), China and India (Chap. 14), the triumph of fundamentalism (Chap. 15), and the decline of the West (Chap. 16). Although this book was written in 2015, many of the topics have great significance for the world today.

Despite the vast amount of evidence presented in various examples, graphs, and tables, which can slow down both reader progression and, to a certain extent, comprehension, the presentation is lively, engaging, and interesting. Given current events—particularly in Europe and elsewhere, with the growing strengths of populism and authoritarianism, with large-scale economic migration, the long lasting presence of wars, a redefining of democracy or democratic principles, and an increasing divergence between rich and poor on both micro and macro levels—the book provides a captivating thesis and is well worth reading, whether one agrees partially or fully with the thesis.

On the macro historical level, Penman’s thesis is fascinating and he documents his ideas with ample evidence from vastly different sources, but this is also a problem. The entire argument rests on personality types and the environmental (largely interpreted) influences upon personality. A wealth of evidence is presented in the span of a few paragraphs or pages that ranges from baboon social development to Victorian Europe, and on to North American society, with no regard for chronology or geography. The absence of any sort of order, either geographically or chronologically, in the presentation of evidence gives the impression to this reader that everything is equal to everything else, and the thesis reductive. If the book had been structured more tightly geographically and chronologically, the individual arguments would have been more convincing and certainly easier to follow. But if a geographical or chronological order were followed, the problem would arise that environmental issues/disasters/crises are asymmetrical, through time and place. These differences are not considered at all, probably because the asymmetrical effects are not fully visible or evident in Penman’s macro-historical approach. The dominance of the C or V type personalities is certainly defensible, but it is the interaction with other C or V civilizations in a micro historical framework of stress, famine, population growth, sexual repression, etc., that creates the rich tapestry of history. For example: yes, the rise and fall of Rome is certainly emblematic (Chap. 12), but a macro-historical approach does not (and cannot) adequately address the evolution of small town on the banks of the Tiber river that became an empire spreading as far as the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. In this particular case, the details of the variety of people, of geography, and of the particular and individual socio-economic developments of each of these peoples through time are absolutely programmatic.

Despite the criticisms noted above, and especially against the background of the world stage today, this book is well worth the effort to read and the thesis is worthy of careful consideration.