

## Just folks

THE ADAPTED MIND. Edited by Jerome Barkow, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby. OUP; 666 pages; £45 and \$55

IT IS not often that the coal-face of science can be reached even by educated bystanders. Discoveries are usually hidden down long tunnels of jargon and complication, and the layman must wait for interpreters to bring garbled news of them to the surface. This book is a rare exception, a volume of fresh and original research of momentous significance that is written in such a way that ordinary mortals can immediately join the debate.

It is made up of essays by a new breed of psychologist that has emerged in the past few years, mostly on America's west coast. They call themselves "evolutionary psychologists" because their approach to the mind, instead of asking simply "How does it work?", asks instead "What is it designed to do?". As sometimes happens in science, a subtle change of emphasis has been immensely productive. Facts are falling into place all over the field, with implications that stretch far beyond psychology.

Why do people watch soap operas? Easy: because they are interested in the social lives of others, even fictional others. But why are they interested in the social lives of others? The evolutionary psychologist (in this case, Jerome Barkow) answers: because the mind is designed to be interested in the relevant activities of rivals, mates, relatives, offspring and acquaintances. It is designed by its past history, for ever since people were apes, those individuals who could best interpret each other's motives left behind more descendants than those who could not. To succeed, man, like many social animals, depends on knowing and manipulating his fellows.

## The abasement of Britain?

## Victory at all costs

BEFORE 1993 few people had heard of John Charmley. He was a young lecturer in English history working away in decent obscurity at the University of East Anglia and at Fulton, Missouri. Then, on January 2nd, a sensationally favourable review of his revisionist book, "Churchill: The End of Glory" (Hodder & Stoughton; 742 pages; £30), appeared in *The Times*.

In the review, Alan Clark, a former Tory minister, asserted that Churchill was a warmonger who had turned up opportunities to get "first reasonable, then excellent, terms from Germany". Instead Churchill pursued a war that

abased Britain before America, bankrupted the country, overturned the social order and ruined the empire.

More than Mr Clark, Mr Charmley is aware of how stupid Churchill would have been to place any reliance on a piece of paper from Nazi Germany. Mr Charmley does, however, think that when Hitler invaded Russia, Britain could have disengaged and let the two evil dictatorships slug it out. But after the *Anschluss*, after Munich, after Danzig and after the Blitz, how would any politician have persuaded the British public to stomach a new appeasement of Hitler? Convincing answer comes there none.

The evolutionary psychologists are merely applying to the mind the same kind of logic that physiologists have used about the body for a century. Bats' wings or human livers or octopus eyes are plainly designed for specific functions: flying, digesting, seeing. They were designed by that fine-tuning tinkerer, natural selection, and brains are no different. Unlike eyes or wings, brains are not designed for a single function, but for many parallel ones: sensing, thinking, imagining, interpreting, communicating, and so on.

This might seem like stating the obvious, but it is startling how seldom psychology has taken this approach and what can result when it does. This book contains, for example, detailed (though often speculative) explanations of the logic of beauty, morning sickness, sexual jealousy, language structure, the fact that women are better at remembering landmarks and men at read-

ing maps, the fact that all over the world people speak to babies in the same peculiar way, even the fact that city parks look superficially like African savannas: grass with groves of trees.

At the heart of the book is an eloquent essay by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides entitled "The Psychological Foundations of Culture". It argues for the need to rescue the concept of a universal human nature from the anthropologist's obsession with human differences. If dolphins could speak, people would soon learn how alike they all are and yet how idiosyncratic—how different from dolphins. All over the world, human beings smile when they are happy, or they suffer from male violence, or they gossip about the same things—who is sleeping with whom, who is in favour with whom, and so on. There are great cultural differences, but there are also great universals.

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