

What It Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee – Apes, People and Their Genes

(By Jonathan Marks, University of California Press,
Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2002)

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The reviewed book is about science, its responsibilities, and how this science can be used. It is based on some previous reviews and publications by Jonathan Marks but this fact does not make it less interesting. On the contrary, putting it all together makes the reading even more stimulating and exciting.

In the great era of Human Genome project, and – broader – of a dominance of molecular genetics over anthropology (at least that is what can be seen in too many departments in too many universities all over the world), the author, a molecular anthropologist himself, is questioning the rights of such dominance. This is the main subject of the book, which refers to many important biological and social issues.

The key idea is »molecular factoid« – the sacred figure of 98%. This is the percentage of genetic material we, humans, share with the chimpanzee. The value itself can be even higher, or lower. Actually, as has been stated recently, this figure may be only 95% (»New Scientist«, 2002, 28 September, p. 50). What the author shows is that the »hard number« does not mean much because of the universal genetic similarities: »our DNA is more than 25% similar to a dandelion's« (p. 5). Does

it mean we can think of ourselves as being »one-quarter dandelion«? Of course, not; but we can and must think of human species as an integral part of the living world. (A very strong argument against creationism – another topic under discussion in the book.) It is culture that makes us humans.

There is a lot more in the 12 chapters of the book. The author discusses enormous body of questions, such as taxonomy and classification, human diversity and the concept of races, nature-nurture debates and behavioral genetics, human and apes rights, science and religion, science and mass media, bioethics, etc.

Sometimes the argument is well known to anthropologists: that races are not biologically different and racism has nothing to do with the existence of races. However, I quite agree with Marks that at present we need to repeat it all over again. Particularly in Russia: there is a strong tendency in this country for neonationalistic movements with huge amount of glossy racist books being published and distributed in numerous copies, which falsify anthropological facts and data. (In fact, a Russian scientific magazine »Priroda« – equivalent of English »Nature« – has published recently an open letter of

Russian anthropologists against »new Russian« racism and »raciologists« who use anthropological terms for propagating old racist ideas. See: Alexeeva T.I. et al. Recurrences of chauvinism and racial intolerance. Priroda, 2003, № 6, p. 80–81).

How strong racist prejudices are, is shown by the works of J. Philippe Rushton, which Marks justly criticizes. One of the latest books by this author (J. Philippe Rushton »Race, evolution, and behavior: A Life History Perspective«, 2nd Special Abridged Edition, 2000) was sent *free* to all Russian members of European Anthropological Association, that is basically to all Russian anthropologists. Since Russian scholars now, due to financial difficulties, do not have an access to most of the new academic publications, this gift was taken with some surprise and bewilderment.

One of the underlying principles of the book under review is the advocacy of human rights. It is from this particular viewpoint that Marks is criticizing such projects, as Great Ape Project and Human Genome Diversity Projects (HGDP). He is no way against rights for apes, but against giving them human rights because they are not humans. Human rights for HUMANS – this is a very humanistic claim held by the author who shows violation of human rights, sometimes with the help of science and scientists both in the past and at present. The question of animal rights cannot be discussed per se – it is interconnected with the question of human rights: »a concern for animal welfare must come out of a concern for *human* welfare« (p. 195). The criticism of HGDP is based on a concern for priorities of »vanishing« people, such as »their customs, their land, their traditions, and their lives« (p. 205) to be preserved, but not their genes in the first place.

The final (12th) chapter is called »Science, Religion, and Worldview«. It dis-

cusses ethnocentricity and authoritative-ness of science; responsibilities of science and scientists in the society for the consequences of their statements; the conflict between science and religion; science and non-science or pseudo-science; »scientism« as »an uncritical faith in science and scientists« (p. 279) and many other issues.

One particular idea I found very interesting: sometimes we indignantly talk about those »pseudo-scientists« giving their false ideas publicly (a very common situation in Russia nowadays). Marks explains that this is a problem of science and not the other way round: because science does not give answers to many questions people care about. The author stresses the responsibilities of a scientific community: »to distinguish for everyone else the science from the pseudoscience« (p. 157), racism being just one of the examples of the latter.

At the very beginning of the book the author considers a famous concept of »the two cultures« by C. P. Snow – sciences and humanities, divided and separated. At the end the same concept reappears but in a different context. Now the author puts a strong belief that it is possible to connect those »cultures«, to bridge scientific knowledge with the humanistic one for better »understanding of the molecular basis of human existence« (p. 288), that what we really need is an alliance but not the opposition. Molecular anthropology in this alliance will take part of »a truly interdisciplinary research area« (p. 288), »a mediator between reductive genetics and holistic anthropology« (p. 6).

Suggestion for the readers: as a reviewer I feel strongly inclined to discuss more passages and give more quotations. However it is much better to read the book itself than any reviews, or criticism. The book is witty, sharp and highly polemical. Some readers may find it provocative, some others – disturbing, still others – brain-storming. Whatever the views, it

is brilliantly written and certainly worth reading. I recommend it to all members of anthropological community worldwide, both students and scholars, and to the general public as well. I think it should be

translated into other languages and I would be most happy to do such a job for the Russian-speaking audience.

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