

CURRENT BOOKS

Abel Strikes Back

BORN TO REBEL:

Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives.

By Frank J. Sulloway. Pantheon. 653 pp. \$30.

by Andrew Mendelsohn

Western history has never looked simpler than in *Born to Rebel*. In this celebrated study, history begins in—and never really leaves—the playpen. At every moment, in any family, brothers and sisters struggle against each other for parental investment, emotional and material. The skills and attitudes developed through this striving, according to historian of science Sulloway, make up a large part of what we call personality. And personalities fall into two groups because siblings enter this intrafamilial Darwinian struggle from two different and unequal starting points: first-born and later-born. Since the first-born starts (ideally speaking) with everything, with the undivided attention of the parents, his or her main task is to keep things the way they are. The task of the later-born is to change the status quo. First-borns tend to be “conservative”; later-borns, rebellious and innovative. The engine of history, writes Sulloway, is this family dynamic “writ large.” Revolutions begin not with a bang but a bicker.

Scientific revolutions from Copernicus’s to Darwin’s to Einstein’s, and social revolutions from the Protestant Reformation to the French Revolution, have been led, we learn, by later-borns. First-borns tend to oppose such radical changes. Sulloway backs up these assertions with what is surely the most impressive database and statistical analysis in the history of historiography. He has spent 25 years gathering biographical information on 3,890 participants in 28 scientific revolutions and on some 1,500 participants in social revolutions, including a number of American reform movements. With the statistical apparatus of *Born to Rebel*, history writing truly enters the computer age.

The simplicity of Sulloway’s thesis doubtless accounts for some of the book’s success at

garnering attention from the news media, to whom facile solutions to intractable problems are always good copy. The same simplicity may well make for a more skeptical reception among scholars. The big surprise of the book, however, is the complexity of Sulloway’s model of family dynamics and how they shape personality. No less than eight variables go into scoring each individual on the scale of radical behavior: birth order, parent-offspring conflict, the number of siblings, the age gaps between them, gender, age at parental loss, social class, and temperament. What more multiplicity could a model accommodate? Although the starkness of its thesis and the presence of statistics may lend *Born to Rebel* an aura of reductionism, the book is in fact no more reductive or one-sided than many of the major theses that have been advanced by historians. Sulloway’s modeling shows that statistical methods can sometimes render generalizations about human behavior *more* subtle and sensitive, not less so.

Sulloway needs all these variables, it is worth adding, else he would be stuck with an embarrassing problem: many revolutionaries were first-borns, including Galileo, Einstein, Newton, Freud, and Luther. This problem is surmountable because, as Sulloway points out, his argument is not that birth order is an infallible predictor of revolutionary personality but, rather, that it is a better predictor than any other variable. Even more embarrassing is the inconsistent pattern of later-born participation in Sulloway’s 28 scientific revolutions. For example, he reports that laterborns were 4.6 times more likely than firstborns to support Darwin and 3.6 times more likely to support Einstein on special relativity—but only 1.3 times more likely to support Einstein on *general* relativity. Some scientific revolutions, such as germ

theory, turn out to have been led by first-borns; they were 3.3 times more likely than later-borns to support it.

In an apparent effort to resolve this inconsistency, Sulloway groups his scientific revolutions by their radical or conservative *political* implications rather than by the degree to which they broke with scientific precedent. Thus the lack of later-born support for Einstein's theories (as opposed to, say, Copernicus's) is attributed to Einstein's having not been "ideologically" radical. Instead, argues Sulloway, Einstein's was a "technical" revolution. But this is tendentious, given the ways in which Einsteinian relativity fundamentally transformed our understandings of space, time, matter, and energy. Similarly, it is misleading to call germ theory, which revolutionized Western medicine and transformed countless aspects of social life (often against great resistance), a "conservative theory" simply because Pasteur was a political conservative.

Will these faults prevent historians from dropping what they are doing in order to follow Sulloway? The question is moot, because the greater reason why historians are unlikely to emulate him is the sheer difficulty of mastering statistical methods the way he has and (perhaps most important) building databases like his. More likely, *Born to Rebel* will serve as a warning about standard categories of explanation, such as social class. Sulloway consistently found that social class did not correlate with social attitudes, such as liberalism; with political actions, such as voting to execute Louis XVI; or with stances toward ideologically charged ideas, such as natural selection or heliocentrism. This is news that historians (and politicians) cannot ignore, whatever they may think about birth order.

It will be interesting to see whether *Born to Rebel* spurs a rethinking of several generations of sociological and historical analysis based on the idea of "interest." Here the seemingly self-evident assumption is that individuals are motivated primarily by their interests, whether these are professional, economic, or social. Drawing attention to the patent but often ignored fact that people frequently act contrary to their obvious interests, Sulloway gives us a possible key to

understanding why. For instance, why did Charles Darwin, an upper-class gentleman whose wealth was inherited from his landed family and whose mind was molded at Cambridge University, that bastion of natural theology, conceive the theory of evolution? The key, says Sulloway, is development. Patterns of behavior developed in childhood, and more particularly within the family, may override the apparent dictates of professional, economic, and political interest in adulthood. One need not buy the whole argument about birth order to appreciate the value of a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between interests and other human attributes and experiences.

Yet there remains a problem. When Sulloway focuses on individuals, he is masterful and subtle on the many factors that reinforce, interact with, or counteract birth-order effects in the shaping of personality. But when he shifts his focus to history, he seldom considers any factors apart from individuals—that is, first-born conservatives and later-born rebels. Is he suggesting that there are revolutions simply because there are revolutionaries? Ironically, he himself provides the best evidence against this implausible suggestion: because of sibling rivalry, revolutionary personalities are being shaped all the time. There is a continuous supply. Yet actual revolutions are few and far between. This weakness lies at the heart of the book. Sulloway has identified a constant. And while historians are interested in constants, history is ultimately about change.

It would be unfair to say that Sulloway does not ask why one particular revolution occurs and not another. Undaunted by the irrelevance of family dynamics to the question, Sulloway ventures to suggest that modernity itself—beginning with the Reformation and continuing through the Enlightenment, democracy, and modern science—is one gigantic birth-order effect, the triumph of liberal, innovative laterborns over the ancien régime of the firstborns. Rather than spin such fancies, Sulloway would have done better to stick with the solid revelations of his database.

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