

How biohistory affects human nature (Excerpts)

Jim Penman tells Ivan Tyrrell how biology drives our social history, explaining temperament change within cultures and the rise and fall of civilisations.



Biohistory is the study of the biological roots of human social behaviour, explaining the outbreak of wars, economic growth and decline, and different styles of government. It proposes that such events reflect changes in the prevailing temperament of the population, which, in turn, is rooted in epigenetics – which explains how the expression of genes is affected by environmental influences and how this expression can be passed on down the generations, influencing hormones and brain activity and how we think, feel and behave.

Animal and human studies show that experiencing maternal neglect or severe stress in childhood has profound effects on attitudes and behaviour. These effects are epigenetic in origin, which means they have a permanent impact on the activity of certain genes. We also know that parental behaviour in each culture changes greatly over time.



The key to understanding civilisation decline begins with the idea that the economic, political, military and cultural make-up of a country is largely determined by the underlying emotional and psychological nature of the population within it.

My (Penman) research suggests that this basic temperament changes over time and is linked to our response to stress, and this process can be understood as the primary reason for significant change within a society.

Today our environment is telling us that food is no longer scarce and so we're losing the temperament that inclines us to work. That's why so many things are going wrong. In the West, the economy is stagnant, for example. Any businessman knows that many youngsters have less of a work ethic than we did even a few decades ago. Most people think that our prosperous economy is going to continue forever, but it won't.

You can also see the decline reflected in attitudes to politics. This scarcity mentality that's driven by our physiology and epigenetics is associated with respect for impersonal values like democracy, law and authority, and we are losing that. The result is that there is more and more cynicism about politicians and government. As people become more cynical about the government, they tend to follow any leader who promises to give them whatever they want.

People think you can change society just by changing the laws. But laws reflect the people. You really have to get to the core of a problem, which comes down to individual people.

You can read the detailed article here: <https://www.hgi.org.uk/resources/delve-our-extensive-library/interviews/how-biohistory-affects-human-nature>

About the author of Biohistory

Jim Penman, author of the Biohistory titles, obtained a PhD in history from La Trobe University, Australia. His doctorate integrated broad historical changes with crosscultural anthropology and aspects of animal behaviour. More recent work focuses on biochemistry and the emerging field of epigenetics. He created the biohistory research programme in 2007, now The Biohistory Foundation. Additional support has been provided by the Australian Research Council, La Trobe University, RMIT University and the Howard Florey institute.

To date, Dr Penman has co-authored 10 peer-reviewed papers in leading journals including Behavioral Brain Research and Physiology and Behavior. Findings so far include a method of dramatically improving the maternal behaviour of rats, with far-reaching effects on offspring. His website www.biohistory.org contains useful information and videos, a programme to model world history, and downloadable copies of his books.

About Ivan Tyrell

Ivan Tyrrell (co-founder ; Human Givens approach) worked for many years as a psychotherapist specialist in brief therapy for depression and anxiety, and now spends most of his time lecturing and writing. In 1997 he co-founded the human givens approach with the Irish psychologist Joe Griffin, and together they have written numerous best-selling books on mental health and wellbeing, psychology, counselling, dreaming, depression, the origins of creativity and consciousness. He is the editorial director of the HGI's journal *Human Givens*, and a director of the Human Givens College.