

**Quinn Slobodian**, *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right*, New York: Zone Books, 2025. ISBN: 9781890951917 (cloth); ISBN: 9781945861437 (paper); ISBN: 9781890951931 (ebook)

**Where are the Mothers of the Bastards? A Review of Quinn Slobodian's *Hayek's Bastards***

In an homage to John Ralston Saul's 1992 book, *Voltaire's Bastards*, historian Quinn Slobodian has titled his newest book, *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right*. The book is an academic exposé of the neoliberal roots of elements of today's far right. As Slobodian explains, the beliefs of the far right are typically viewed as in tension with the tenets of neoliberalism. Slobodian's project is to show that in fact many of the far-right movement's contemporary beliefs can be traced to the intellectual fathers of neoliberalism, even if the offspring have bastardized their fathers' ideas. In doing so, he shows how the resurgence of the far right is not as sudden as it may seem to the casual observer.

One of the insights of Slobodian's book is to show how far-right thinkers often justify their policy preferences by appealing to scientific explanations. *Hayek's Bastards* focuses on key tenets of what he calls the "new fusionism," which took hold in the 1990s. New fusionists "defended neoliberal policies through arguments borrowed from cognitive, behavioral, and evolutionary psychology and in some cases genetics, genomics, and biological anthropology." It is this turn to scientific, and often biological, explanations that makes these offspring bastards, rather than the legitimate progeny, of earlier neoliberal thinkers.

As the book's title indicates, Friedrich Hayek—neoliberal economist and one of the founders of the Mont Pelerin Society—is an important patriarch in this lineage. The way that Hayek's descendants interpreted his views on evolution and economics illustrates Slobodian's larger point about the bastardization of earlier neoliberals' thought. In the 1970s, Hayek explained his beliefs on evolution and economics through what he termed the "savanna story."

The story goes that humans initially developed in small tribes and were oriented toward the group more than the individual. As those tribes grew and interacted with other groups more, trading and division of labor increased. As groups traded over longer distances and with more

and more groups, it became “inappropriate and impracticable” to maintain group solidarity. More complex trade went hand-in-hand with the rise of greater indifference to others.

On this account, New Left activists of the 1960s, in seeking a return to more collectivism, were appealing to humanity’s biological drive to care about the group. But, for Hayek, this drive is harmful because more complex economic systems require more focus on the individual than the group. As Slobodian puts it, “mass mutual indifference was the secret to sustaining human civilization.”

The savanna story has been significant for Hayek’s intellectual heirs. Hayek himself claimed that his focus was on “cultural evolution through learning” rather than genetics—and Slobodian characterizes him as making a “shift from genes to culture,” which “grant[ed] his followers a blank check for their own interpretations.” Hayek’s heirs have appealed to this story and other parts of his thought in offering their own takes on genes, culture, and economics. All of these things are, in turn, infused with beliefs regarding gender, reproduction, and feminism—though they barely appear in Slobodian’s otherwise illuminating account.

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While Hayek tried to avoid social Darwinist implications, some of his followers focused on biology and reprised social Darwinism for a new age. It is this turn to biology and genetics, then, that constitutes the bastardization of Hayek’s thoughts. But the bastard framework of the book traffics in the same focus on genes and finding truth through paternal genealogical origins. Why the concern with fathers? What does it mean to be a bastard?

The status of illegitimate child was an important legal designation under English common law, which persisted in colonial and early America. An illegitimate child—a bastard—is simply a child born to a mother who is not married to his father. Being a bastard meant that the child had no legal claim on his father for support and could not inherit from the father. A bastard child’s mother was always known, while his father could not be known with certainty. Knowing the mother is insufficient. After all, inheritance in the West is patrilineal.

“Bastard” is now mostly used as a synonym, the thesaurus tells me, for terms such as “scoundrel,” “beast,” or a “son of a bitch.” Again, with the lineage. The status of the mother being passed to the son, because bastards are typically understood to be men. A bastard son would be a scorn on the mother, not the father. The mother would be disgraced for bearing a child out of wedlock. The father would bear little consequence.

On a podcast,<sup>1</sup> Slobodian himself noted, without expounding, the “questionable gender connotations” of the bastard frame. Yet the bastard framework that Slobodian imposes on his material omits women. His search for true origins and their meaning includes only passing references to gender and reproduction. But both the notion of a bastard and the commitments of the far right have everything to do with gender. Reviewing Slobodian’s account, we find only glimpses of gender and reproduction.

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Slobodian focuses on the development of new fusionists’ beliefs in three “hards”: hard borders, hardwired human difference, and hard money. Taking readers on a journey into the intellectual genealogy of various neoliberal splinter groups, Slobodian shows how biological explanations for hard borders merged with economic explanations. He explores, for example, the thinking of white supremacist Peter Brimelow on the topic of immigration. As Slobodian explains, Brimelow’s 1995 book *Alien Nation* understands xenophobia as both “required for racial cohesion” and “economically rational.”

There were various schisms in the 1990s among libertarians on the topic of immigration. However, there was also a growing consensus that different groups—whether because of culture or race—had different levels of economic capacity. This racist belief had implications for immigration. Those in the alt-right, which Slobodian characterizes as “the most radical strain of the new fusionism,” turned to hard borders.

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<sup>1</sup> “401. Ruled by Bastards (ft. Quinn Slobodian).” *This Machine Kills*, April 15, 2025.

<https://soundcloud.com/thismachinekillspod/401-ruled-by-bastards-ft-quinn-slobodian>.

In the 1990s, new fusionists showed a growing interest in the science of intelligence to support their policy preference for hard borders. Intelligence is one of the key “hardwired human differences” that is a bedrock of far-right thinking on Slobodian’s account. He details the various figures, institutions, and publications dedicated to white supremacist pseudoscience regarding racial differences in IQ.

Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s 1994 book *The Bell Curve* plays an important role in this story. The book sought to show inherent IQ differences among racial groups and was indebted to many thinkers who had dedicated themselves to keeping “the flame of IQ racism alive” after “the horrors of National Socialism.” *The Bell Curve* also argued that welfare policy and immigration policy both contributed to the nation’s declining cognitive capacity. These arguments were picked up by a number of new fusionists. As Slobodian puts it, “the book tapped into a constellation of funders who shared a vision of inegalitarianism and an opposition to the redistributive social state.”

That opposition to redistribution also fueled fears of a monetary crisis that propelled the far right to commit to the last of the three “hards”: hard money. This commitment involved lamenting the end of the gold standard, which had restrained the state’s spending and money production, and investing in precious metals. Many of those committed to hard money blamed monetary problems on “degenerating morality” and the welfare state. As Slobodian explains, “The erosion of traditional family, the multiplication of children born out of wedlock, the rise of no-fault divorce: all were seen as bloating state spending, entitlements, and transfers and accelerating the coming crisis.”

Let’s parse this in a way that Slobodian doesn’t. The fear here is the birth of too many bastards. Neoliberals blamed the racialized mothers of the bastards for being dependent on the state, and the fathers for being absent. Here, as elsewhere, gender and reproduction appear at the margins of Slobodian’s account. There are passing references to beliefs in gender-based intelligence differences and fears of a decline in family values. The anti-feminism that is central to the far right—and intertwined with its racism—does not emerge as significant in Slobodian’s narrative, focused as it is on white fathers.

Where are the mothers of the bastards? It behooves us to build on Slobodian’s careful and penetrating analysis to look for them in order to deepen our understanding of Hayek’s bastards. It may be too late for their mothers, but these bastards are working to bring about a high-tech future of abundant childbearing for their daughters.

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While the far right calls for closed borders, they are simultaneously panicked about declining white fertility. If immigration is off the table, the answer to a declining population is more babies. Making babies, for the moment, requires bodies with uteruses—mothers, if you will. Slobodian ends the book with a fleeting mention of “the new panic over fertility and birth rates,” but does not investigate its origin or consequences. For my part, I’m less interested in the intellectual progenitors than their progeny.

One progeny that appears in *Hayek’s Bastards* is Jared Taylor, founder of the *American Renaissance* magazine. Slobodian covers Taylor’s scientific racism and his links to various other far-right figures. What is not addressed are Taylor’s views on feminism and reproduction. On the *American Renaissance* website he has written about what he sees as an alarming trend of white women’s declining birth rate.<sup>2</sup>

In one post,<sup>3</sup> Taylor favorably summarizes the speech of a frequent *American Renaissance* poster, F. Roger Devlin who argues that women in Africa often farm without the need for men because of the favorable climate. In contrast, farming in Europe “required the strength of a man” and encouraged women’s dependence on strong male providers. Feminism reverses this natural European inclination and “makes European women more like African woman-farmers” in their independence from men.

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<sup>2</sup> “White Guilt Up; Birth Rates Down.” *American Renaissance*, August 23, 2024.

<https://www.amren.com/videos/2024/08/white-guilt-up-birth-rates-down/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Awakening Finland.” *American Renaissance*, May 29, 2025.

<https://www.amren.com/commentary/2025/05/awakening-finland/>.

This, combined with everything from women’s increased participation in the paid workforce to no-fault divorce, has contributed to declining white fertility. The fact that women typically get custody of their children upon divorce is also a problem. That fact, along with not wanting to pay alimony, discourages men from getting married and having children. Taylor summarizes Devlin’s view:

We have made family formation even more difficult still, through no-fault divorce and by routinely granting child custody to mothers. It is a mistake to assume that in the past, marriage was a prison for women. They could leave any time. However, they could not take the children with them—they belonged to the father—nor could they expect alimony, so they left only if they were very harshly treated.

This quote encapsulates a traditional view of the problem with bastard children: they don’t belong to the father because they are born to unmarried women (or at least women who are not married to the fathers). In this anti-feminist rant, we see more of an acknowledgment of the gender connotations of the bastards than in Slobodian’s book.

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Let’s see what happens when we look at another of the progeny’s beliefs—biological differences in intelligence—from the perspective of reproduction and gender. The same racist right-wing thinking that is preoccupied with the idea that intelligence is straightforward, measurable, and highly heritable informs the development of certain reproductive genetic biotechnologies.

*The Guardian* recently reported that the US-based biotechnology startup Heliospect charges up to \$50,000 to screen embryos created through in vitro fertilization (IVF) for intelligence.<sup>4</sup> Trump supporters, elite pronatalists, and media darlings Malcolm and Simone

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<sup>4</sup> “US Startup Charging Couples to ‘Screen Embryos for IQ’.” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/oct/18/us-startup-charging-couples-to-screen-embryos-for-ig>.

Collins are among the users of this technology, which is called polygenic embryo screening (PES). PES purports to tell prospective parents the likelihood that a given embryo will develop any of a number of traits that result from a complicated interaction between multiple genes and the environment. The acknowledgement that genes and environment intertwine in complex ways is itself an admission of the limitation of searching for the truth of origins in genes.

A voluminous literature details the myriad problems with PES, including its predictive limitations, shaky scientific foundations, and reliance on eugenic thinking. More to the point here, investigative journalists at the UK-based organization Hope Not Hate<sup>5</sup> have uncovered clear links between Heliospect and the alt-right. For example, Curtis Dunkel is an associate of Heliospect. Dunkel has published in *Mankind Quarterly*, which Slobodian describes as “founded and run since 1961 by open white supremacists” as a platform for arguments for “the innate, immutable, nontrivial disparities in ability between genetically defined races.” Dunkel has also been a co-author with Emil Kirkegaard.<sup>6</sup> Kirkegaard is at the helm of the Human Diversity Foundation, which is a rebranded form of its predecessor, the openly eugenic Pioneer Fund.

Heliospect is the first known polygenic embryo screening company to sell its screening technologies to predict intelligence, yet several other companies offer the screening for other characteristics—ranging from schizophrenia to diabetes to irritable bowel syndrome—to people conceiving through IVF. At least one other PES company has links to the far right. Stephen Hsu<sup>7</sup>—who has long held racist beliefs about IQ and hoped to use genetics to raise the IQ of the population—is a founder of PES company Genomic Prediction. The company initially planned to offer screening for intelligence but backed off after outcry.

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<sup>5</sup> “The Superbaby Factory.” *Hope Not Hate*, October 18, 2024. <https://investigations.hopenothate.org.uk/superbaby-factory/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Race Science Inc.” *Hope Not Hate*, October 16, 2024. <https://investigations.hopenothate.org.uk/race-science-inc/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Stephen Hsu and Ronald Unz and Holocaust Denial.” *Fardels Bear: A History of the Alt-Right*, June 11, 2020. <https://altrightorigins.com/2020/06/11/tin-foil-hats-holocaust-denial/>.

Hsu has appeared on alt-right activist Richard Hanania’s podcast.<sup>8</sup> Hsu and Hanania bond over their shared interest in IQ. Slobodian describes Hanania as believing that “high IQ in individuals and nations leads to success, libertarianism, and appreciation of markets.” Both are worried about the decrease in the average IQ of the US population and fascinated by the possibility of genetic technologies being used to reverse the decline.

However, reproductive biotechnology also scrambles what it means to be a father or a mother. In a sense, IVF allows for the proliferation of bastards. Who are the parents of a child gestated within and born from the womb of a so-called surrogate who has no genetic relationship to the child? Can a child have three parents? What if a married same-sex couple creates an embryo using the genetic material from one of them combined with a donor’s gamete? Is the child so conceived a bastard?

IVF has necessitated new legal regimes to determine parentage. It has also altered views of what it means to be a parent, thus complicating the notion of a bastard. However, alongside IVF, reproductive biotechnology companies have created an array of genetic technologies that focus on genes. Some supporters of these technologies want to return to a time when illegitimate children and their mothers were scorned.

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In gutting the social safety net, neoliberalism has meant that individuals are more on their own. We are encouraged to take individual actions to protect ourselves from precarity of all sorts—including genetic risk. In a world in which social support is declining and uncertainty is increasing, parents’ individual consumer decisions to mitigate risk for their future children seems rational.

However, this genetic turn is disastrous for the community and further enriches those who are investing in individualism and genetic essentialism. Given that “optimized” children

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<sup>8</sup> “The Future of Humanity Is IVF Babies and Chinese Domination | Steve Hsu & Richard Hanania.” *CSPI Podcast*, February 14, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNy98yZg9iQ>.

will likely be treated as superior by their parents—and that they already have the advantage of wealth given current prices for these technologies—the results of genetic screening may be to make Hayek’s bastards’ simplistic genetic explanations for economic outcomes seem even more plausible.

As Erik Baker has pointed out,<sup>9</sup> alt-right social Darwinist ideas are more easily accepted because of neoliberalism. Neoliberal policies that have redistributed wealth upward and resulted in less prosperity and more ill health for most of the population have created a world that seems, if you don’t look too hard, to support these biologically based arguments about society and the economy.

In a world that the far right understands as full of existential threats to the future of humanity, pronatalism and genetic reproductive technologies offer an insurance policy for the elite who can afford it. As Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor describe it,<sup>10</sup> “contemporary far-right movements lack any credible vision for a hopeful future” since they are “financially and ideologically committed to deepening” the things—such as climate chaos and inequality—that threaten our lives and societies.

I would add that reproductive genetic technology provides a simulacrum of a vision for a hopeful future. If the plummeting birth rate is an existential problem, then technology offers a potential solution in enabling white women to breed more and to have “superior” babies. These are hardly ancillary ideas in the far right’s constellation of values. Everywhere the alt-right wants to remove women from the public sphere<sup>11</sup> and encourage straight white women to get married and breed.

All pronatalism traffics in the hope for the future that babies embody. Genetically screening babies adds a tech-utopian element that justifies putting resources into genetic research

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<sup>9</sup> “Trump’s Darwinian America.” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 10, 2025. <https://harpers.org/archive/2025/07/trumps-darwinian-america-erik-baker/>.

<sup>10</sup> “The Rise of End Times Fascism.” *The Guardian*, April 13, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/apr/13/end-times-fascism-far-right-trump-musk>.

<sup>11</sup> “Women’s Tears Win in the Marketplace of Ideas.” *Richard Hanania’s Newsletter*, February 7, 2022. <https://www.richardhanania.com/p/womens-tears-win-in-the-marketplace>.

and calls for an unregulated, “no-holds-barred”<sup>12</sup> approach to that research. In fact, the reproductive biotechnology industry is booming, with one new company offering “the first-ever genetic optimization software”<sup>13</sup> for embryos. Despite a widespread consensus against heritable genome editing of embryos using techniques like CRISPR, some billionaires are working with scientists to commercialize the technology.

This technology is a manifestation of the racism, genetic fetishism, patriarchal views, and pronatalism of the far right. It helps supply the movement with a vision of the future for the white elite. *Hayek's Bastards* reveals the intellectual genealogy that got us to this point even if it ignores the central topic of actual gendered and embodied reproduction in favor of a patrilineal metaphor.

*Jennifer Denbow*  
*Political Science Department*  
*Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo*  
*jdenbow@calpoly.edu*

*May 2026*

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<sup>12</sup> “Mass Production of Genetically Selected Humans: Inside a Pennsylvania Pronatalist Candidate’s Fantasy City-State.” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/03/simone-collins-pronatalist-pennsylvania-candidate>.

<sup>13</sup> “Parents Can Choose Genetic Makeup of Their Children With New IVF Option.” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2025. <https://www.newsweek.com/parents-ivf-genetic-makeup-testing-2081470>.