On Evolutionary Atavism

My so-called mind is still churning from our conversation about evolutionary atavism, the idea that current behavioral systems may be ill-suited to contemporary circumstances. As an evolutionary psychologist I should be for it; however, as a survivor of the instinct wars of the 1950’s, I should be against it. Where am I?

The problem with evolutionary atavism arises when people start attributing any necessity to it. Natural selection would not be possible if organisms did not offer up structures and behaviors that are maladapted. Evolution could not have occurred if organisms did not respond to these maladaptations with adaptive changes. Evolution is a dynamic between change and stability and the interesting question is why some things change while others don’t, and why some changes occur more rapidly than others. Asserting that some things are the same as they were a million years ago because they didn’t happen to change is just silly.

Still, evolutionary atavism does play a role in my thinking. Let’s work an example together and see what that role is and whether it is justified. I listened with guilty pleasure to Obama’s address ridiculing MAGA thinking. My pleasure was guilty because I thought his speech would make Trump more likely to win the election. This conclusion arose from an evolutionary hypothesis about the origins of charisma. The logic, such as it is, goes like this.

1. **The modern human species arose 160kyrs ago from a very small number of small groups.** That the human species passed through a severe bottleneck at it inception is probably true; that it was composed of small group at that time is a plausible surmise.
2. **Those groups were engaged in intense competition at the bottleneck.** This statement is reasonable but not supported by any data I can think of.
3. **Therefore, they survived or failed as groups.** Again, merely plausible.
4. **Those *groups* survived that were capable of rapid concerted action.** This is based on the idea that in emergencies it is most important for every to do some thing, rather than for them to wait and work out the best thing to do.Barely plausible. Not even clear how one would go about researching it.
5. **Groups capable of shifting to an authoritarian organization in response to a perceived existential threat survived in greater numbers than those that didn’t.**
6. **Humans, therefore, are inclined to put their faith in a single person when they perceive an existential threat.** Let’s call this the “Charismer Response”
7. **The person most likely to be selected for this role is apparently single-minded and decisive.** This gives us the characteristics of a **Charismer**,
8. **Charismees relinquish their capacity for independent rational thought in favor of the Charismer’s decision-making.**
9. **Charismees receive benefits from the group in proportion to their demonstrations of surrender of rationality.**
10. **Charismees demostrate their surrender by the repetition of o or more flagrantly irrational beliefs. (virgi birth, stole election , etc.)**
11. **Challenges to these beliefs only increase charismees allegiance to the group**
12. **Therefore, Obama should have kept his smarty-pants mouth shut.**

You all ca**n** evaluate the heuristic, rationality, a**n**d probability of this argument. I am going to stop **n**ow because my keyboard has stopped reliably producing “**n’s”**  ad is drivig me uts. At best,I think evolutionary atavism is a source of plausible hypotheses about why organisms are not adapted to their current circumstances. See some of you tomorrow.

Sicerely,

ick