



A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation

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In this ground-breaking book, a renowned bioethicist argues that the political left must radically revise its outdated view of human nature. He shows how the insights of modern evolutionary theory, particularly on the evolution of cooperation, can help the left attain its social and political goals.

Singer explains why the left originally rejected Darwinian thought and why these reasons are no longer viable. He discusses how twentieth-century thinking has transformed our understanding of Darwinian evolution, showing that it is compatible with cooperation as well as competition, and that the left can draw on this modern understanding to foster cooperation for socially desirable ends. A Darwinian left, says Singer, would still be on the side of the weak, poor, and oppressed, but it would have a better understanding of what social and economic changes would really work to benefit them. It would also work toward a higher moral status for nonhuman animals and a less anthropocentric view of our dominance over nature.

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Pi says

A great short read about the interface between Darwinian and leftist thought.

Singer offers a critique to early leftist writings, such as Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* and Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, that attempt to incorporate evolutionary ideas in their theories, claiming they "got Darwin wrong". Indeed it seems that "scientific" socialism, as presented by Engels, was, contrary to his claim, very much utopian, due to its strive towards a perfect society. There is also Kropotkin's reliance on an idealized conception of human nature as intrinsically 'good'. Views that are difficult to commensurate with Darwinian theory, which firmly rejects a priori value judgments and teleological arguments. These and other early writers on the left believed invariably that evolutionary thinking should be limited to the biological, and can never inform the social. Precisely this idea should, according to Singer, be dismantled in order to progress left-wing politics. He offers modern evolutionary models of cooperation and cultural change, as ample evidence supporting such a move.

As a result, we end up with a revised, albeit non-original, view of the left that is less utopian and more expansive in its domain; with Darwinian theory serving not as a source of values (as suggested by some people on the right), but as a tool for identifying bad theories and policies, incompatible with modern scientific understanding of society.

Maryam says

I was expecting Singer would be a left Darwinist himself, but the book is more of a preaching for left Darwinists to compromise their values which leaves quite nothing from left. However, it gives a good account of how values could easily overshadow the facts.

LS Mitchell says

Required reading for all Lefties.

John says

The application of "Darwinian principles" to society, rather than to biological evolution, has generally been the province of the political right, with the crackpot ideas of Herbert Spencer and his followers -- the philosophical school later called Social Darwinism -- being used by the Robber Barons and their ilk as a good excuse to ignore the inordinate amount of sheer human misery their activities caused: all the poverty, starvation and suffering, all the destroyed lives, were worth it because that was the price that had to be paid for species advancement. My, you could almost look upon the Social Darwinists as saints and saviours. And, of course, we cannot forget the Objectivists, the disciples of the even more crackpot Ayn Rand.

What Singer attempts to do in the pages of this extremely slender volume is to lay out a few ground rules for what he doesn't call a Social Darwinism of the left, a political philosophy that relies less upon the "nature red in tooth and claw" aspects of Darwinism (that phrase anyway predated the announcement of the Darwin/Wallace theory) and more upon those aspects that recognize the value of characteristics like cooperation, aspects that the Spencerians simply ignored in their orgy of pseudoscientific cherry-picking. Since it had never struck me before that Singer's point was one that actually had to be made, that it wasn't wholly evident to anyone possessed of reason, I'm not sure I was actually the audience he was aiming at; at the same time, the book's very natively written and sparkling with pertinent observations so I regret not one second of the time I spent reading it. Here's one item that had me punching the air in admiration:

[T:]o leave a group of people so far outside the social commonwealth that they have nothing to contribute to it, is to alienate them from social practices and institutions in a manner that almost ensures that they will become adversaries who pose a danger to those institutions. [. . .] Social Darwinists saw the fact that those who are less fit will fall by the wayside as nature's way of weeding out the unfit, and an inevitable result of the struggle for existence. To try to overcome it or even ameliorate it was futile, if not positively harmful. A Darwinian left, understanding the prerequisites for mutual cooperation as well as its benefits, would strive to avoid economic conditions that create outcasts. [. . .] When the free operation of competitive market forces makes it hazardous to walk the streets at night, governments do well to interfere with those market forces to promote employment. (p53)

Singer was writing before the recent exponential increase in the gap between rich and poor in many of the developed nations. It is depressing how much more poignant his observation has become than it was a mere decade ago.

Paul says

What's there to say? As someone deeply sympathetic to Evolutionary Psychology or the Darwinian approach towards Human Nature (especially its behavioral and psychological aspects), I pretty much agree with Peter Singer's starting point. In effect, I also agree with him that Marxist view of human nature as a social construct of society is pretty much bunk. The diamond in the rough is Singer's idea that instead of viewing Darwinian thought about human nature with hostility or suspicion (you know, because of "Social Darwinism" and other atrocities committed under the name of "Eugenics"), the Left should use it as a scientific framework imposing some constraints on which social/economic policies are feasible and which beliefs about the world are consistent with Darwinism. This leads to the idea that the left should use some insights from Darwinism to establish social conditions that encourage or trigger the pre-existing cooperative aspect of human nature towards reciprocal altruism. Singer doesn't exactly state what that condition is, but I suspect it is on purpose because he only wants to provide a very broad view about what direction the Left is suppose to take. Moreover, Singer insists that we should avoid deducing values from facts, a mistake made by those on the right and left side of the spectrum. Instead, the Darwinian framework is the ground in which people have to think about human nature very seriously and carefully before proposing and implementing policies that may or may not presuppose an unrealistic view of human nature. Those are the highlights of Singer's short little book.

My only concern is that the book targets people who identify with many liberal/left values, but become disillusioned or dissatisfied with the political orthodoxy on the left that dismisses any idea antithetical to the notion that human nature is malleable. He does go through the history of the Left to understand their suspicion about Darwinism applied to Human Nature, but he barely engages with its contemporary critics. I

suspect this is because Singer's book is more like a proposal than a philosophical defense of the Darwinian Left. This isn't a very serious objection to Singer's book, but it is worth mentioning to readers who might want to find some kind of debate. I think I recommend this book to anyone who identify with many liberal values, but disagree with the Left's take on human nature.

Ivan Loginov says

Biologická argumentace autora m?že dnes p?sobit vágn? a zastarale - nezachází p?íliš do podrobností a kv?li stá?í publikace ani nereflektuje fakta o lidské p?irozenosti, která byla zjišt?ná v posledních desetiletích. Nicmén? kniha vyslovuje pot?ebnou kritiku a vyty?uje cíle pro levice do budoucna. Pat?í mezi n? p?edevším odmítnutí utopických vizí a snaha p?i tvo?ení sociáln? spravedliv?jšího systému se opírat také o nejnov?jší poznatky z oblasti biologie a psychologie. Nem?lo by to však sklouznout k biologickému determinismu a odmítnutí vlivu kulturních faktor? na ontogenetický vývoj ?lov?ka.

Fritz-Anton Fritzson says

Given that I am neither a utilitarian nor a leftist, I was surprised how much I agreed with in this little book. And the few things that I do not agree with have very little to do with Singer's application of Darwinian thought to politics (an idea with which I am much sympathetic), nor indeed with his utilitarianism (which in this particular book is rather watered down), but rather with his weak grasp of economics. To counter this bias, I strongly recommend to read this book in tandem with Paul H. Rubin's Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom. Like Singer, Rubin argues that there are evolved political preferences in humans and that political systems must consider, and perhaps adapt to, these preferences. But, unlike Singer, Rubin does not start out with a specific political agenda but tries instead "to be somewhat more analytical and allow the agenda to come from the preferences". He analyses which political institutions allow humans to fulfil their evolved preferences, rather than imposing his own preferences on them. Rubin shares Singer's utilitarian starting point, but reaches quite different political conclusions. Rubin pokes holes in some of Singer's most dubious claims. As such, these two books are good companions (see my review of Rubin's book here: <http://www.oxymoronsreviews.com/oxymo...>).

Note also that Singer's book is very short and does not offer the rich empirical background needed for a beginner. Matt Ridley's The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation is a very good easy-to-read introduction. For more information on the history and the general debate of applying evolutionary thinking to social and political matters see Steven Pinker's excellent The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature.

Fritz- Anton Fritzson

<http://www.oxymoronsreviews.com>

Elizabeth says

A small taste of some interesting ideas.

Charles Collyer says

A clear exposition of Darwinian ideas that should be embraced by progressives. Discards some of the optimism of perfectability; accepts the reality of biological variation, without gratuitous extrapolation.

Bcoghill Coghill says

Dated. Theory is sound but facts are dated.

Matthijs Krul says

Neither Darwinian nor left. A very shoddy, superficial, poorly argued book. Only occasionally worthwhile points, most of which have little directly do to with Darwinism.

Squatting Erudite says

Brilliant little book! As a left-leaning ethnic Kekistani, it was refreshing to read something as rational, intelligent and to-the-point as this.

The general left has gone completely crazy with its politically correct authoritarian views and postmodern dogmas that are absurdly out of touch with reality. This book is the polar opposite of this madness that has inflicted contemporary left. I'd go even further and say that this perspective could at least provide a partial antidote to it and possibly help to free the left from the chains of postmodernist PC ideology.

Our society needs both the left and the right and I'd recommend this book to anyone. But I'd like to stress one thing before I finish:

IF YOU CALL YOURSELF A LEFTIST, READ THIS SHORT INSIGHTFUL BOOK... please :)

Thomfrost says

A Darwinian Left would not:

- Deny the existence of a human nature
- Expect to end all conflict and strife between human beings

-Assume that all inequalities are due to discrimination

A Darwinian Left would:

- Reject any inference from what is natural to what is right
 - Expect both competition and cooperation
 - Promote structures that foster the latter rather than the former
-

Martin Makara says

Ak dôjde k diskusii o "ľudskej prirodzenosti" v spojitosti s politikou, hneď sa za ňú vyberať hrozienka z koláča. Socialisti tvrdia, že ľovek je prirodzene kooperatívny a vyhŕadáva spoluprácu, kapitalisti majú ľloveku za vlastnú konkurenciu a zápas o zdroje. Oba tábory robia tú istú chybu - a síce, že zanedbávajú fakt, že v istej podobe sú ľloveku prirodzené obe tieto polohy. Ako to teda je? Existuje vôbec niečo ako ľudská prirodzenosť? Ak áno, tak ako ju zdefinovať? Je premenlivá alebo nemenná? A je evolúcia "dobrá" či "správna"? Možno z nej odvodzovať hodnotové závery? Peter Singer, bioetik a filozof, sa vo svojej útlej knihe zaoberá práve týmito otázkami, pričom sa mu darí nachádzať nezriedka prekvapivé odpovede na to, ako by ľavica nemala ísť hlavou proti múru, ale prispôbiť sa pohnutkam tých, ktorými sa zaoberá. To všetko v úľadnom balení aj s exkurzom ho histórie a pozorovaním, prečo mala ľavica vždy ambivalentný vzťah k darwinizmu, čo si o Darwinovom diele myslel Marx či Engels, a či je nehierarchická spoločnosť vôbec možná.

David Kapusta says

Petra Singer je pre mňa veľkou inšpiráciou v oblasti aplikovanej etiky a už desaťročia bojovníkom za práva zvierat. Vegetariánstvu a vegánstvu dal morálny obsah a desaťročia dráždu svojimi názormi a postojmi. V tejto sviežej knižke sa snaží ísť k akejsi podstate ľavice. V prvej ľasti upozorňuje na to ako v minulosti zle ľavica pochopila Darwina. Prečo Engels nad Marxovým hrobom vyjadril mimoriadnu poklonu tým, že prirovnal Marxov objav zákona ľudského vývoja K Darwinovému "zákonu vývoja organickej prírody" ? Singer sa snaží odpovedať prečo ľavica sa nakoniec postavila voči darwinizmu odmietavo a prináša základný prehľad konfliktu medzi marxistickou teóriou dejín a biologickým pohľadom na ľudskú prirodzenosť.

Čo sa môže od Darwina naučiť nová ľavica ?

Autor zdôrazňuje v ľalšej ľasti, že ten kto sa snaží zmeniť spoločnosť, tak musí najprv pochopiť sklony, ktoré sú vrodené ľudskej povahe a upraviť svoje abstraktné (ľavicové) ideály, tak aby boli v súlade s ľudskými sklonmi a zároveň nikto nechcel po druhom, aby konal proti svojim vlastným záujmom. V závere ľnej ľasti sa pokúša o syntézu moderného darwinovského myslenia, ktoré vsalo do seba myšlienky konkurencie a recipročného altruizmu, čiže zjednodušene obyčajnú ľudskú spoluprácu. Peter Singer odhaľuje záhadu altruizmu interpretáciou vedeckých poznatkov, behaviorálnych štúdií a snaží sa odpovedať na otázky odkiaľ sa berie altruizmus a ako nastaviť také podmienky, že sa bude dať prirodzenej spolupráci medzi nami ?

V závere svojej eseje predkladá základné smerovanie novej darwinovskej ľavice. Akceptovať ľudskú

prírodnosť a založiť politiky na najlepších dostupných poznatkoch o tom akí v skutočnosti sme. Podporovať také sociálne štruktúry spoločnosti v ktorých sa darí viac spolupráci ako konkurencii a pokúsiť sa nasmerovať konkurenciu k spoločensky prospešným cieľom. Držať sa tradičných ťavicových hodnôt a stáť na strane slabých, chudobných a utláčaných a nachádzať také ekonomické zmeny, ktoré im budú k prospechu. A v neposlednom rade priznávať väčší morálny status zvieratám a ich právam a opustiť antropocentrický pohľad dominancie človeka nad prírodou.
