

Review of: *A Darwinian Left: politics, evolution and cooperation*, by Peter Singer. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2000.

If you had asked an educated English gentleman, towards the end of the 19th century, to name the most important political philosopher of the century, the answer you received would very likely have been: Herbert Spencer. The same question asked of an educated American gentleman during this same period would have produced the same answer. If anything, the American response might have been a shade more enthusiastic even than the British response.

Spencer was, among other things, a follower of Charles Darwin, and the core of his political philosophy was an attempt to apply to society key insights garnered from the Darwinian theory of biological evolution.

On Spencer's reading of the Darwinian theory of evolution – featuring the principle of natural selection - the biological principle of the “survival of the fittest” could be extended in such a way as to justify a *laissez-faire* marketplace society. Wealthy capitalists prospered and deserved to prosper because they were the fittest to survive, while the poor, being unfit, should be allowed to perish. Or so Spencer argued. Indeed, government assistance to the poor, in the form of social welfare payments, was likely to do more harm than good by protecting the unfit from their deserved fate. By allowing the poor to survive and procreate one was defying the natural order of things and weakening society. Little wonder that Spencer quickly became as big a hit in early capitalist America as he was already in middle capitalist Britain.

Those who make a pilgrimage to Marx's monumental grave in London's Highgate Cemetary might notice, if they look carefully, a small unkempt grave located almost opposite. On the small head-stone atop this grave, overgrown with weeds and in danger of falling over, is carved the name of Herbert Spencer. Spencer may have towered over Marx in life, but in death the tables have been turned.

Interestingly, although Karl Marx himself had enormous admiration for the work of Darwin, as did Marx's collaborator and close friend Friedrich Engels, the left has predominantly come to associate Darwinian evolution with Herbert Spencer's right wing doctrine of social Darwinism and its associated defense of the competitive marketplace.

In this little book – really, a longish (sixty page) essay – the Australian philosopher Peter Singer attempts to rehabilitate Darwin for leftists. If the Darwinian struggle for existence has seemed more congenial to thinkers of the right, the fault rests partly with Herbert Spencer, but also with evolutionary biologists themselves, who until comparatively recently have neglected the important role that cooperation can play in improving an organism's survival prospects.

The central political question, according to Singer, may be simply put: “How can we build a society that is cooperative and offers a strong safety net for those who are unable

to provide for their own needs?” Singer argues that the answer to this question can be found by modifying the insights of traditional left thinking and blending them with those of Darwinian left thinking. Singer tries to persuade his reader that the phrase “Darwinian left thinking” is not an oxymoron. Despite the extreme brevity of his treatment of this complex issue, Singer presents his ideas clearly and comprehensibly.

Singer contends, then, that some widely accepted traditional leftist assumptions need to be modified in the light of what Darwinian biology has to teach us. We are probably not capable of being transformed into the saintly altruists of socialist day-dreams but, at the same time, we aren’t necessarily doomed to remain the greedy egoists described by capitalist ideology.

Against the traditional left, Singer argues that it is simply unrealistic to suppose that human nature can be perfected, or that either socialism or communism is capable of ushering into existence a society in which all conflict and competition between human beings will be absent. Equally, however, it is unrealistic for the right to imagine that most people are incapable of responding positively to genuine opportunities for cooperation.

Our species evolved by a natural process of competitive struggle, yes, but mutually beneficial cooperation and individual sacrifice on behalf of group flourishing have also been important evolutionary strategies. Evolutionary theory, properly understood, shows that people can be motivated by altruism as well as by narrowly self-seeking behaviour. If society were organized under a different socio-economic system it is likely that the prevailing balance could be shifted somewhat away from competitive individualism, towards a more cooperative and community-oriented kind of society. Notice how cautious this claim appears to be: the balance can be shifted, but competition may well turn out to be an inescapable and important part of human nature. We are not infinitely malleable, carrying within our nature, as we do, the evolutionary baggage of our species.

Singer acknowledges that this is a sharply deflated vision of the left, but he offers it as a realistic alternative to utopian socialism, and as a highly attractive alternative to the triumphant marketplace capitalist ideology which currently holds sway in most western liberal societies.

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