

Peter Singer

POLITICS, EVOLUTION

A Darwinian Left

AND COOPERATION

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A
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**POLITICS, EVOLUTION AND
COOPERATION**

Peter Singer

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FOREWORD

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Darwinism Today is a series of short books by leading figures in the field of evolutionary theory. Each title is an authoritative pocket introduction to the Darwinian ideas that are setting today's intellectual agenda.

The series developed out of the Darwin@LSE programme at the London School of Economics, where the Darwin Seminars provide a platform for distinguished evolutionists to present the latest Darwinian thinking and to explore its application to humans. The programme is having an enormous impact, both in helping to popularize evolutionary theory and in fostering cross-disciplinary approaches to shared problems.

With the publication of **Darwinism Today** we hope that the best of the new Darwinian ideas will reach an even wider audience.

Helena Cronin and Oliver Curry



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INTRODUCTION

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The need for a new foundation

In 1874 Karl Marx read *Statism and Anarchy* by Mikhail Bakunin, one of the founders of anarchism as an international revolutionary movement and Marx's main rival for control of the First International. Marx was not passive about anything he did and, in reading Bakunin, he copied out key passages from the book, and then added his own comments. The resulting manuscript, which Marx never intended for publication, reads like a debate between the foremost anarchist and the foremost communist of the nineteenth century. Here is a section of it:

Bakunin: Universal suffrage by the whole people of representatives and rulers of the state – this is the last word of the Marxists as well as of the democratic school. They are lies behind which lurks the despotism of a governing minority, lies all the more dangerous in that this minority appears as the expression of the so-called people's will.

Marx: Under collective property, the so-called will of the people disappears in order to make way for the real will of the cooperative.

Bakunin: Result: rule of the great majority of the people by a privileged minority. But, the Marxists say, this minority will consist of workers. Yes, indeed, but of ex-workers who, once they become only representatives or rulers of the people, cease to be workers.

Marx: No more than a manufacturer today ceases to be a capitalist when he becomes a member of the municipal council.

Bakunin: And from the heights of the state they begin to look down upon the whole common world of the workers. From that time on they represent not the people but themselves and their own claims to govern the people. Those who can doubt this know nothing at all about human nature.

Marx: If Mr Bakunin were familiar just with the position of a manager in a workers' cooperative, he could send all his nightmares about authority to the devil.

The most tragic irony of the history of the past century is that the record of governments that have claimed to be Marxist shows that Marx got it wrong, and Bakunin's 'nightmares about authority' were grimly prophetic. Bakunin's own solution to the problem of authority would no doubt also have gone awry; but when he suggests that someone who holds views like those of Marx and his followers 'know nothing at all about

human nature', it is hard to disagree. Nor was Marx's mistake about human nature a minor aberration. Thirty years earlier, in one of his celebrated 'Theses on Feuerbach' (VI), Marx had written:

. . . the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

It follows from this belief that if you can totally change the 'ensemble of the social relations', you can totally change human nature. This claim goes to the heart of Marxism and of more broadly marxist (with a small 'm') thinking. As a result, it affects much of the thought of the entire left.

The left needs a new paradigm. The collapse of communism and the abandonment by democratic socialist parties of the traditional socialist objective of national ownership of the means of production have deprived the left of the goals it cherished over the two centuries in which it formed and grew to a position of great political power and intellectual influence. But that is not the only reason why the left needs a new paradigm. The trade union movement has been the powerhouse and the treasury of the left in many countries. What capitalists failed to accomplish by a century of repressive measures against trade union leaders, the World Trade Organization, enthusiastically endorsed by social democrat governments around the world, is doing for them. When barriers to imports are removed, nationally based trade unions are undermined. Now when workers in high-

wage countries demand better conditions, the bosses can threaten to close the factory and import the goods from China, or some other country where wages are low and trade unionists will not cause trouble. The only way for unions to maintain their clout would be for them to organise internationally; but when the discrepancies between the living standards of workers are as great as they are today between, say, Europe and China, the common interests for doing so are lacking. No one likes to see their living standards drop, but the interests of a German worker in keeping up the payments on a new car are not likely to elicit much sympathy from Chinese workers hoping to be able to afford adequate health care and education for their children.

I have no answers to the weakening of the trade union movement, nor to the problem that this poses for political parties that have derived much of their strength from that movement. My focus here is not so much with the left as a politically organised force, as with the left as a broad body of thought, a spectrum of ideas about achieving a better society. The left, in that sense, is urgently in need of new ideas and new approaches. I want to suggest that one source of new ideas that could revitalise the left is an approach to human social, political and economic behaviour based firmly on a modern understanding of human nature. It is time for the left to take seriously the fact that we are evolved animals, and that we bear the evidence of our inheritance, not only in our anatomy and our DNA, but in our behaviour too. In other words it is time to develop a Darwinian left.

What is essential to the left?

Can the left swap Marx for Darwin, and still remain left? To answer that question we have to ask another: what is essential to the left? Let me answer this question in a personal way. During the past year I have completed both a television documentary and a book about Henry Spira. That name will mean nothing to most people, but Spira is the most remarkable person I have had the privilege of working with. When he was twelve years old, his family was living in Panama. His father ran a small clothing store, which was not doing well, and to save money the family accepted an offer from a wealthy friend to stay in some rooms in his house. The house was a mansion that took up an entire city block. One day two men who worked for the owner asked Henry if he wanted to come with them when they collected rents. He went with them, and saw at first hand how the luxurious existence of his father's benefactor was financed. They went into the slums, where poor people were menaced by the armed rent collectors. At the time, Henry had no concept of 'the left', but from that day on he was part of it. Later Spira moved to the United States, where he became a Trotskyist, worked as a merchant seaman, was blacklisted during the McCarthy era and then, when he won the right to work on ships again, was a central figure in a reform group that challenged the corrupt bosses of the National Maritime Union. In 1956 he went to the South to support blacks who were boycotting their local buses because they

wanted the right to sit in the same seats as white people. When Fidel Castro overthrew the Batista dictatorship, Spira went to Cuba to see the process of land reform at first hand and, on his return to America, tried to rally public support against the CIA's attempts to overthrow Castro. He left the Trotskyists because they had lost touch with reality, and he taught ghetto kids in New York's public school system. As if that wasn't enough for one lifetime, in 1973 he read an essay of mine called 'Animal Liberation' and decided that here was another group of exploited beings that needed his help. He has subsequently become, over the last twenty years, the single most effective activist of the American animal rights movement.

Spira has a knack for putting things plainly. When I asked him why he has spent more than half a century working for the causes I have mentioned, he said simply that he is on the side of the weak, not the powerful; of the oppressed, not the oppressor; of the ridden, not the rider. And he talks of the vast quantity of pain and suffering that exists in our universe, and of his desire to do something to reduce it. That, I think, is what the left is all about. There are many ways of being on the left, and Spira's is only one of them, but what motivates him is essential to any genuine left. If we shrug our shoulders at the avoidable suffering of the weak and the poor, of those who are getting exploited and ripped off, or who simply do not have enough to sustain life at a decent level, we are not of the left. If we say that that is just the way the world is, and always will be, and there is

nothing we can do about it, we are not part of the left. The left wants to do something about this situation.

At this point I could go into a long discussion about the philosophical basis of the more egalitarian society to which the left should aspire. But enough books have been published on that topic to fill a medium-sized public library, and I do not want to add to that literature now. It is enough to say there are many different ideas of equality that are compatible with the broad picture of the left that I am outlining here. My own ethical position is utilitarian, and the imperative of reducing suffering flows directly from that position. Although as a utilitarian I do not value equality for its own sake, I am very conscious of the principle of diminishing marginal utility, which tells us that while a given sum of money, say £100, makes very little difference to the utility of someone who already has a lot, it may make a huge difference to the utility of someone who has very little. In a world in which the 400 richest people have a combined net worth greater than the bottom 45 per cent of the world's population – about 2.3 billion – and over a billion people live on less than US\$1 per day, that principle provides enough grounds for urging us to work towards a more equal distribution of resources.

Now that I have roughly outlined what I mean by 'the left', we can turn to the politics associated with Darwinism. I shall begin by asking: where has the left traditionally stood in regard to Darwinian thinking, and why?