



Gods That Fail

Peter Singer and the Darwinian Left

Reviewed by Eric Jones

The Second Annual Darwin Lecture: A Darwinian Left?

Delivered by Peter Singer

12 May 2000, London School of Economics

Forget Karl Marx. The Left is now being exhorted by Peter Singer to embrace the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin.

In his Darwin lecture at the London School of Economics (*Higher Education* 17 June 2000) Peter Singer urges the Left to seek a new intellectual sponsor and names the unlucky winner. A hideous loss of life having been inflicted on the population of the planet and heaven knows what cost in lost income for the poor having been exacted in the name of Marx, the Left is now exhorted to abandon him and embrace Charles Darwin instead. This need to change horses in midstream does not come from grasping Marxism's intellectual failings, nor from remorse (Singer does not calculate how much Marxism cost), but from the fact that even Blind Freddy can see that it did not work.

At least the cure cannot be worse than the disease. It is not however a cure at all. It is a quack remedy. Marx and Engels themselves pillaged Darwin for what they could get out of him, sneered at him in their usual fashion, and made what would now be called racist remarks about him. When Marx read *The Origin of Species* he wrote to Engels that, 'although it is developed in the crude English style, this is the book which contains the basis in natural history for our view.' They turned against what they saw as the social, as opposed to the biological, implications of Darwinism when they realised that it contained no support for their shibboleth of class oppression. Since they were slippery customers rather than scientists, they were not likely to relinquish their views just because something did not fit.

No one has shown, and Professor Singer does not show, that the language of evolutionary theory applies to human society except as a mere replacement for other ways of talking about it. No discussion of 'social Darwinism' could

really alter the fact that what this sort of thing involves is only an act of translation—and translation of whatever people want to say. Singer's discovery of the obstinacies and greed of individual human natures may represent a breakthrough for Left intellectuals but tells us nothing about the rules, whatever they may be, that influence how our natures are combined in social life.

Although it seems impossible now to get evolutionary terms out of the language, they do not in themselves tell us that *society* changes via any particular set of selection mechanisms. Such foundations are not secure ones to build on. Evolutionary biologists are often impassioned people but they do not agree among themselves about which evolutionary model applies to the natural world. Most mean Darwinism plus Mendelian genetics, but more and more of them are talking the language of Neo-Lamarckianism in which learning becomes 'enetically assimilated.' Most envisage slow gradual change through the spread of successful mutations; others see defining, convulsive changes at intervals through the (relatively) rapid shifts of 'punctuated equilibria.'

Social scientists who borrow from evolutionary biology are even less agreed than biologists about which unit of selection the force of evolution is supposed to affect. Is it social classes, social groups, individuals, or ideas? Little or nothing is to be gained by these exercises, any more than by Singer's arbitrary three-fold classification of behaviour

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into categories that show great, some or little variation across cultures. Biological species is a problematical enough concept; we hardly know what a 'culture' is. *Ex cathedra* assertions about these things will not create a science, nor yet a social science.

Now that the London School of Economics has been captured and politicised by the 'Blairite Project', no doubt Professor Singer found a ready audience there. That does not make it morally right to use the university to push the barrow of any political group. It is certainly naive to think that a lecturer's political views will not sometimes show through and candour may mean the speaker ought to acknowledge them. But it is malign and incorrect to suggest that the individual cannot stand aside from his or her own preference.

What Professor Singer wants to do is to use the academe to announce a new intellectual figurehead who can provide the Left with a structure for its arguments. He has found a dead-end in Darwin; Marx went there and came away again, while Darwinian language lacks demonstrated social content. Analysis of society can be expressed to more effect in the language of economics, which is not surprising given that both Darwin and the classical economists owed much to the same intellectual grandfather, the demographer, Thomas Malthus.

Singer's 'Darwinian' programme includes the following sinister admonition: 'promote structures that foster co-

operation rather than competition and attempt to channel competition into socially desirable ends.' This rejection of competition is truly ironical for someone drawing on Darwin. Think about the passage. Now forget the emotive phrase about co-operating. Think whether the interests of the poor and weak will really be served by a society that lacks competition. This is a Hansonian view, it will beggar us all. The poor and weak more than anyone need the best and the cheapest in ideas and products, things that come from contestability—from competition—as much as does good football performance. Think next about the final phrase, 'socially desirable ends.' Who is to say what ends are socially desirable other than those which people—and not 'the Left'—freely choose?

What, in any case, is this Left? It is not the elected Left. It has elected itself to look after, and define, the interests of the weak—and, come to that, to define who the weak are. It therefore runs a grave risk of being what the Hansonites accuse such people of being, a condescending elite. Why in any case does the Left need an intellectual father-figure? Choosing one inevitably flawed hero can lead only to the realms of hagiography, and the endless sterile disputes about interpreting sacred texts, that characterised Marxism. A primitive need for a human god ought to be unlearned, fast. If the left—I drop deliberately from Left into lower case—needs anyone, it is Charles Booth more than Charles Darwin.

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