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A New Social Darwinism ?

Michael Rustin

Biological Darwinism

First, I would like to make a distinction between 'biological Darwinism' and the transposition by way of analogy or metaphor of Darwinian ideas of variation, replication and selection to the social sphere. Some versions of 'biological Darwinism' have been very unwelcome to social scientists, who have defended, often as a radical social constructionism, the idea that the 'social' is not determined in any way by biological substrates.

I regard this rejection of Darwinist explanations as wrong – after all, mortality and reproduction are natural facts, and all individuals and societies and individuals have to cope with these. Biology has a primary causal role in human affairs, mediated by social process as it must be. I also think that some strictly Darwinian ideas, applied to the 'social' are illuminating, though I do not think of myself as a 'social Darwinist'.

I have in mind the investigations of the development of human infants and children, as these have been studied by attachment theorists following the work of John Bowlby (1972, 1973, 1988) and by psychoanalysts (of whom Bowlby was originally one). (For comparison of these two perspectives, see Fonagy 2001). Both of these theoretical approaches draw attention to the similarities between the needs of mammals, in particular primates, in their early nurture, and the needs of human infants. In Bowlby's terms, if human infants are deprived of a secure attachment to a sustaining mother figure in their first year or two of life, some of the capacities which they would develop in those conditions will be damaged in their absence. They will be likely to

¹ Paper originally for the Bath AcSS-ESRC Seminar, 14 March 2007 (Contributions by Ian Gough, W.G. Runciman, Geoff Hodgson, Ruth Mace, Michael Rustin).

become more insecure, anxious, dependent or conflictful, and will be more likely to have difficulties in fulfilling the role they may later have as parents. Impressive empirical studies (Bretherton and Waters 1985) have validated and elaborated these ideas, enabling investigations of the learned modes of attachment of parents, inferred from their descriptions of their own children, to predict the probable modes of attachment of children, even yet unborn (Fonagy et al. 1991) Current political programmes directed to improving the qualities of nurture in the 'early years' draw on these ideas and findings.

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy in her book Mother Nature (1999) has taken these understandings further, from an evolutionist point of view. She has proposed that the vulnerable conditions of infants in hunter-gatherer societies have led to the selection of certain 'survival strategies' to become genetically encoded in the constitution of human infants. They are at risk of abandonment by their mothers, and to competition from siblings, in conditions of scarcity. Furthermore they are at risk should their mother find herself with a sexual partner who is not the infant's own father. Thus, Hrdy argues, human infants have evolved to be highly attractive to their parents, and indeed to adults in general, as well as having a piercing capacity to make any distress or fear they may feel known to all in their locality.

More unexpectedly, Hrdy's evolutionary perspective, drawing on the sociobiological work of Robert Trivers (2002) explains why there is an inherent ambivalence in the relationship between infants and their mothers, and between infants and siblings, and why infants have reason for suspicion of parental sexual activity which is likely to lead to the birth of new babies, and thus competitors. As the philosopher Jim Hopkins (2003) has pointed out, Melanie Klein's description (Klein 1975) of the anxieties and inner conflicts inherent in the relationships of early infancy, so at odds with sentimental idealisation of the mother-infant bond, finds a new support in these conjectures. In Hrdy's view, even the mother and her and the baby's placenta may be competitors for survival in times of scarcity, as well as later the mother and her newborn infant. Hrdy makes clear why it is that the abandonment of infants at extreme moments has been a rational survival

strategy. The potential for conflict between mother and infant, for Oedipal anxieties concerning father, and possible displacement by new babies, and mothers' capacity for anxiety concerning their capacity to sustain their babies (and their need for support in doing so) are rendered more intelligible if we think ourselves back to the hunter-gatherer era in which human genetic endowments were set down.

The research of Bowlbian attachment theorists, and of psychoanalysts in the British object-relations tradition who share some presuppositions with them, has developed within a particular ethical perspective, linked to a commitment to renewed social integration and community solidarity which was influential in Britain in the post-war period in which Bowlby began his work. Evolutionist arguments about 'human nature' have thus been deployed in support of a preferred conception of social relations. This need not be an illicit procedure, so long as it is recognised that such descriptions of the consequences of different kinds of social organisation (including patterns of child-rearing) do not replace moral judgements, by conflating fact and value, but do identify some factual constraints on choices between feasible ways of life.

Sociological Darwinism

Now to the application of Darwinist perspectives to sociological and anthropological analysis. I agree with Geoffrey Hodgson that the distinction between genotype and phenotype seems fundamental to making use of the Darwinian analogy for the understanding of social development, since it is so central to Darwin's own theory. (Roughly speaking, in nature, if you are a sparrow there is no point in learning to swim.) In society, what are the equivalent limits to individuals' freedom of action, and how far do Darwinian processes of variation and replication help in understanding them? It was a major contribution of sociology and anthropology to show that there were such limits, or to put this in another way, that choices always have to be negotiated within a field of possibilities. Such limits may be determined by culture (what it is possible to think or feel within a given milieu), by the distribution of power, and by material resources, in various combinations. 'Men make history, but in

circumstances not of their own choosing,' as Marx put it. The question is how far do Darwinian ideas improve on the various classical sociological framings of this question, which have tended to focus, within the traditions of the subject (Durkheim, Weber, Marx and their descendants) on one or other of these three 'power dimensions' (Giddens 1971). The question is whether Darwinism contributes a distinctive new mode of explanation, in addition to explanations by reference to genetic templates (e.g. hunter-gatherer or mammalian dispositions) whose positive value I have discussed above.

The problem seems to be that the more Darwinian accounts seek to accommodate the facts of cultural transmission, and to take account of what in evolutionary debates is termed the 'inheritance of acquired characteristics', the more they depart from the framing of Darwin's own theory, in the direction of the Lamarckian position which Darwin's theory of natural selection defeated. The clarity of the Darwinian programme, which has been maintained throughout its successive stages from Darwin, through Mendel's idea of genes and chromosomes, to the biochemical and informational mapping of the genome, lies in the fact that inheritable characteristics – what Geoff Hodgson refers to above as replicators, remain conceptually and in reality to a large degree distinct from the processes by which they are selected. 'Variation' and 'selection' take place so to speak in different conceptual spaces.

How far can this separation be sustained in extensions of Darwinian thinking to the social and cultural spheres? I would like to suggest a distinction between those social forms in which the separation between 'variation' and 'selection' is strong, and those where it is weak or absent. Example of the former are producer markets in which incremental innovations are 'selected for' by competition, scientific activity where variations are 'selected' by the decisions of a larger scientific community, and innovations in art forms, where once again selection of successful variants (new genres, forms, or techniques) is independent of their production. All of these analogues to

Darwinian competition seem, incidentally, to be products of liberal kinds of social organisation.

Contrast these with systems where power holders successfully control variation (in the economy, in the arts, in ideas) as a primary strategy for maintaining their dominance. State socialism is such an instance. In one system, variation and selection are (deliberately) structured as separate processes, in the other, such separation is vigorously resisted. Very different patterns of innovation, diffusion and selection will obtain in these different systems. In so far as Darwinism is to be seen as a resource for understanding specific patterns of innovation and diffusion (as in the work described above by Ruth Mace) it will have different applications in the two cases. In the first, these may be quite close to its biological and ecological source field, in the latter more remote from it.²

One can argue that on a larger social scale, there will be competition between these systems themselves, as in the Cold War between capitalism and communism, or nowadays perhaps in a struggle for dominance between more and less regulated forms of capitalism. But there seem likely to be great differences in the form of application of Darwinist models at these different levels, and where the modes of variation and selection are so differently configured. To call of these forms of contest and competition 'Darwinist seems to achieve an apparent universal scope at the expense of explanatory precision.

It seems an interesting fact about the Darwinist paradigm that its most precise application is to forms of structured competition which occur and are valued within a particular kind of social order. 'Social Darwinism' in its early

² The 'actor network' theory of Bruno Latour and his colleagues (Latour 2005) considerably complicates the idealised model which posits a state of 'perfect competition' between scientists and their discoveries. The success and spread of depends on the conceptual links they are able to establish in various fields, and also on the substantive alliances that scientists are able to achieve with for example funding sources who can sustain further research. This suggests that modelling the processes of variation and selection in science (and other fields) is much more complex than a classical conception of 'separation' can capture. Agency is assigned to many kinds of 'actant', human and non-human, in Latour's view. There may be fruitful links to be made here with Darwinian mappings.

nineteenth century days was mapped on to an ideology of unbridled economic individualism, which led to the rejection of Darwinism by many sociologists, even to this day. But if we see that the application of Darwinist principles to social explanation now requires the understanding not only of the processes of competition, but also of the institutional and regulatory conditions necessary to sustain them, we can see the possibilities for a Darwinism which is more genuinely social than hitherto.

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