



Book Review

Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom (Rutgers Series on Human Evolution) by Paul H. Rubin. Paperback: 256 pages. Publisher: Rutgers University Press; ISBN: 0813530962.

Reviewed by David L. Smith

Paul Rubin, Professor of Economics and Law at Emory University, has written a detailed, informationally dense discussion of the evolutionary roots of political preferences. In my view, Rubin provides an excellent survey of a variety of issues relevant to understanding politics as an outgrowth of evolved propensities dating back to the EEA (Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness). It is a detailed and systematic work, with a strong leaning towards political economics. Stylistically, Rubin's writing is reminiscent of that of Richard Alexander: precise, scholarly and thoughtful with no fluff. *Darwinian Politics* repays close, careful reading. In fact, *Darwinian Politics* is so rich in content that it defies summary. Although I am an avid reader of the literature on human sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, this slender volume introduced me to literatures that I was not aware existed, and surprised me by approaching familiar concepts in novel and exciting ways.

The first chapter introduces various elements of evolutionary thinking that are relevant to an analysis of political preferences and behavior, most of which will be familiar to readers of this review. There is a particularly good discussion of why evolution does not make us all identical, making use of the hawk-

dove game, and the concept of frequency-dependent behavior. The first chapter also introduces a central strand of Rubin's argument: although modern economies involve positive-sum games (games in which the gains of all the players are greater than the losses), we evolved in circumstances where the economy was zero-sum (the gains and losses of all players add to zero, i.e., my gain is your loss). As a result, we tend to regard mutually beneficial trade (positive-sum) as a competitive enterprise (zero-sum) a disposition which, in the case of international trade, also receives contributions from our 'xenophobic modules' with unfortunate results, an approach used to good effect in a critique of Kevin MacDonald's account of anti-Semitism in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two, which deals with groups, contains interesting discussions of the importance of flexible criteria for group membership which is described as 'a major biological characteristic of humans' which has allowed us to live in large agglomerations whilst retaining a variety of group affiliations. The move to large groups was crucial not only because, as Alexander has argued, it provided protection from predators, but also because of the division of labor, and thus increased productivity, possible in large groups, as well as the evolution of lan-

guage (Dunbar) and Machiavellian intelligence (Humphrey, Byrne & Whiten). Flexible group affiliation would also have made it possible for early humans to join the victor in inter-group competitions, thus enhancing their fitness. There is also an interesting discussion of ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflict may have paid off in the Pleistocene because one's group was composed largely of one's kin, and common ethnicity was therefore a marker of genetic relatedness, but in today's world ethnic conflict delivers neither fitness nor economic benefits. Although Rubin regards it as possible and desirable to curb our disposition towards ethnic conflict by education, he does not apply the same reasoning in his treatment of affirmative action, which he regards as dangerous because, in affirming sub-group identification, it 'can unleash the very ethnic identification and ethnic-based policies that it is aimed at correcting'. To my mind, Rubin's view of the level ethnic conflict in the United States is far too sanguine, and this is perhaps why he is not inclined to recommend that Americans should be educated out of opposition to affirmative action. As a recent émigré from Britain, the claim that 'there is relatively little ethnic strife or conflict' in the US made my jaw drop. Relatively little *overt* ethnic conflict, yes. Very little compared to, say, Rwanda or Yugoslavia, but I am not sure that such countries provide an appropriate yardstick.

Chapter Three deals with altruism in the context of both individual and group selectionist models. Rubin covers a diverse set of topics under this heading, including the welfare state, the political philosophies of Bentham, Marx and Rawls, various concepts of equality, and the evolutionary origin of social rules. Bentham gets good marks as the proposer of a fitness-maximizing theory whereas the Rawlsian and Marxist approaches are predictably described as incompatible with evolved political preferences. For me, the highlight of this chapter was the discussion of the origin of social

rules which begin as evolved dispositions for social norms and are eventually codified as laws: "neither proto-humans or humans lived in a time without rules or in a time when they were forced to write such rules *de novo*." I will not attempt to encapsulate the content of the remaining chapters on envy, political power, religion and political decision-making, each of which is thought provoking and scholarly. The final chapter makes explicit the relevance of the Pleistocene for an understanding of contemporary politics, usefully presenting the conclusions of the preceding chapters in summary form.

Although my own left-wing sensibilities sometimes chafed against Rubin's conservatism, I found this book to be a remarkably convincing, erudite and perceptive analysis of the complex ramifications of human evolution for political life. Although the *Darwinian Politics* tends to focus on American political economy, and the author tends to lionize the US as the most effective society of satisfying our evolved political preferences, which may limit the book's international appeal and raise the suspicion that Rubin's scientific objectivity may be colored by his nationality, the quest for ways to deal with the urgent problems of social life on both national and international scales, cannot fail to benefit from being informed by evolutionary biology, and Paul Rubin has made a decisive step in this direction. One cannot but hope that his book will secure a wide readership, and receive serious consideration by economists, jurists and policy makers.

David Livingstone Smith, Ph.D., Director, New England Institute for Cognitive Science and Evolutionary Psychology, University of New England, Westbrook College Campus, 716 Stevens Avenue, Portland, Maine 04103, USA. Email: dsmith06@maine.rr.com.