



Book Review

The First Darwinian Left: Socialism and Darwinism 1859-1914 by David Stack.
Cheltenham, New Clarion Press, 2003. 149pp.

Reviewed by Samuel Clark

David Stack has two ambitions in *The First Darwinian Left*. First, to show that nineteenth-century socialists did not use Darwinism as a tool of opportunity, or to give a scientific veneer to a pre-existing politics. Rather, they developed their thinking out of a ferment of open Darwinian and socialist discourses, and were often Darwinists before they were socialists. Second, to warn against the “folly” of a “growing movement to use Darwinism as the foundation for a new politics of the left” (p. vii), represented especially by Peter Singer and his book *A Darwinian Left* (1999).

In meeting his first, historical ambition, Stack is brisk, readable and theoretically savvy. He is particularly convincing, for instance, on the way in which Alfred Russel Wallace drew on Darwinian, socialist and spiritualist discourses in his contributions to nineteenth-century debates about race, about the distinction between humans and (other) animals, and about stages of sociability distinguishing ‘savages’ from the ‘civilised’, on the various ways in which socialists including Jack London, Annie Besant and Ramsay MacDonald read and appropriated the apparently uncongenial work of Herbert Spencer; and on the subtleties of so-

cialist involvement in eugenicist ideals. Stack concludes that a loosely understood Darwinism formed the “constitutive metaphor” (p. 119) of socialism between 1859 and 1914, and resulted in a Labour party, under MacDonald, which put its faith in a gradual, inevitable evolution of society towards socialism.

Stack makes some good points against Singer’s naïve historical understanding of the left. But overall he is unconvincing in meeting his second, polemical ambition, for two reasons. First, he adopts the rhetoric of a conspiracy theorist: as he fulminated against “the disarmingly plausible Helena Cronin” (p. 3) of the Darwin@LSE group, and accused Singer of “reducing humans to a set of bestial impulses and desires” (p. 4), I began to wonder who would be found in the book depository, and who on the grassy knoll. Second, and more importantly, Stack’s argument against a biologically-informed left is weak. He claims that “to follow Singer’s advice, and once again make Darwinism the discursive space in which... socialism is constructed... would strip the left of its belief in the capacity of humans to change themselves and society” (p. 122). I do not see why. As Stack helps to show, Darwinian meta-

phors and ideas are available, and have been used, for a variety of political purposes. It is not obvious, and I think not true, that using them would necessarily lead us to deny “the counsel of hope” that “humans can shape and reshape the cultural space they inhabit” (p. 123). Humans clearly can do this: the questions are, how can they, and in what ways? Evolutionary biology is one potential resource for answering them.

Singer’s book is in need of criticism on historical, biological and philosophical grounds: the reader looking for it would do better to start with Alan Carling’s review (2001). In general, the problem of the relationship between socialist politics and Darwinian biology is pressing, difficult, and unresolved here.

Despite these criticisms, Stack has made a useful contribution to the history of the left. He

sparks interest, raises questions, and occasionally provokes irritation, and that is reason enough to read his book.

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References

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- Singer, P. 1999. *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
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