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# Evolution and a Free Society: Spencer, Kropotkin and Popper

David Wells\*

## ABSTRACT

Despite the negative connotations often associated with 'Social Darwinism', theorists representing a wide range of political opinion have drawn on Darwinian ideas to support their own positions. An examination of the views of Spencer, Kropotkin and Popper, as representatives of the Right, the Left and the Centre, provides an interesting basis for a consideration of the application of Darwin's thesis to social and political life. Although these theorists develop very different visions of the good society, they are all Darwinists, and they all use an evolutionary model to support their visions of a free society. A comparison between their different use and interpretation of Darwinism, and a critical evaluation of their positions, displays the significance of Darwinism as well as identifying some of the major difficulties which arise in the attempt to apply this perspective to a consideration of political issues.

The interpenetration of biological and social theory has no better example than in the formulation and impact of Darwin's theory of evolution. Not only are there direct connections between this theory and the classical political economy of the time<sup>1</sup>, but it is also clear that later sociological, economic and political thought was often heavily influenced by apparently Darwinian perspectives. Yet this extremely significant theory, the central organising principle of modern Biology, has become something of a pariah in the social sciences. This is probably because, as Mackenzie (1978: 37) suggests, 'Social Darwinism' came to be associated with the eugenic and racist themes which 'hitched evolutionary ideology to the creed of nationality and race... culminating in the ideology of *Mein Kampf*'. But the association of Darwin with the more illiberal strands of what has come to be called 'Social Darwinism' is little more than an unfortunate historical accident.

While Halliday (1971:401) argues that the term 'Social Darwinism' should be limited to the theorists of the Eugenics movement he is also forced to admit that 'to define Social Darwinism this way is to leave many questions unanswered and many problems unresolved' (1971:402). Not the least of

these is that the influence of Darwin's theories on social and political thought was obviously far more wide-ranging than this and, as Rogers (1972:280) points out, '(These)... so-called Social Darwinists were not even consistently Darwinists'. Furthermore, since many writers who either explicitly or implicitly draw on Darwin's Theory of Evolution for support have done so in powerful defences of freedom, it seems rather harsh to suggest (as such a narrow usage does) that there is something inherent in a Darwinian perspective in social and political theory which necessarily leads in such an illiberal direction<sup>2</sup>. Given the re-emergence of an overt Darwinism in the field of 'Sociobiology' and its less obvious, but no less significant, impact on the theorists of the environmental and ecological movements, there seems good reason to examine some of these defences of freedom in more detail.

For this purpose the views of Spencer, Kropotkin and Popper are of particular interest. They are similar enough in their concern with the characteristics of a free society and their use of Darwinian theory to provide a useful bias for comparison, yet they are very different in the political visions they develop. As writers who might loosely be identified as thinkers of the Right, the Left and the Centre, respectively, they can be seen as representatives of the major political positions found in most western societies. If nothing else, this displays some of the flexibility of an evolutionary approach to political questions.

'Neo-Conservatives' and ideologues of the 'New Right' might not often draw directly on Spencer's work, but the kind of 'free market' and monetarist economic views usually associated with these movements would have won his enthusiastic approval. For a theorist who once suggested that the mint should be handed over to private enterprise more recent calls for the 'privatisation' of public companies might even appear rather tame. Equally, arguments for the deregulation of industry and the labour market, the need to allow free market forces to act independently of government controls, attacks on the welfare state, and the applause directed at small business and individual entrepreneurs would all have sounded familiar to his ears. Spencer was the extreme defender of laissez faire capitalism<sup>3</sup>

ter of a particular kind of society than with the processes of social and political change within societies. It is the opposition to 'utopian' or 'holistic' planning and his defence of 'piecemeal' social engineering which is central to his political position (1974a). Although this concern places various limitations on the kinds of societies which could be regarded as 'open', it says very little about their internal policies or aims. Even Popper's insistence that it is 'the greatest and most persistent evils in a society' which should be overcome in a piecemeal way does not provide this information, because he never tells us what these evils are. The democratic socialist, as much as the liberal or conservative, could claim to be following this approach to political life. Popper, in short, is essentially a reformist; an ideology of the middle whose basic arguments are compatible with the mainstream of politics in most western societies.

Yet, even given the extent of these differences at a purely political level, Spencer, Kropotkin and Popper share much at a basic theoretical level. In particular, they are all vitally concerned with freedom and the creation of a free society, and they all call upon Darwinian theory to support their respective visions. Indeed, in each case their images of free societies are direct reflections of their understandings of the nature of evolution itself. For these theorists a free society would be one where restrictions on the operation of natural evolutionary forces were removed. As Jones (1980:77) says of Spencer and Kropotkin, 'both wanted to restore the social world to a closer relationship to the natural one, as they saw it'. Furthermore, in each of their arguments 'evolution' is used as both a descriptive and a prescriptive framework. They all identify evolutionary forces at work in society, they agree that these forces are hampered in various ways, and they all aim for a situation where these forces would be unleashed. It is for these reasons, even in the face of their many differences, that they might all be considered to be 'Social Darwinists'.

Ironically, this view is hardest to sustain in the case of Spencer, who is often characterised as the 'father' of Social Darwinism. Yet, if anything, Spencer seems to have gone to some pains to avoid any implication that his views were in any sense derived from Darwin's. For instance, in his massive three volume *Principles of Sociology*, first published from 1876 to 1896, he only refers to Darwin in the first volume, and even here the reference is to *The Voyage of the Beagle*, not to *The Origin of Species* or *The Descent of Man*. He also stresses, in the preface to his fourth edition of *First Principles*, that his arguments preceded Darwin's and that the Darwinian thesis only affixes a small part of his theory. In fact, the only concession he makes is the addition of one short note, with the grudging admission that the 'openness' he promotes is consistent with a whole range of political possibilities. The core of his argument is less concerned with the detailed character of a particular kind of society than with the

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The echo of Kropotkin's views can be found in the more radical side of contemporary politics, not only in the remaining anarchist groups, but also in elements of 'green' movements and feminism. While not really an 'ecological' thinker, in the sense that his term is used by many modern environmentalists and 'eco-feminists', the stress which Kropotkin places on community, self-sufficiency, local autonomy and decentralisation, and his attack on the consumerism and waste of industrial capitalism are themes which have been repeated by many of the theorists of these groups. Equally, his rejection of the sexual division of labour and the recognition that a system of apparently public freedom might well mask the realities of private sexual oppression (1972: 140-144) foreshadow the arguments made by many modern theorists of the broader feminist movement. He states, for example:

Only let us fully understand that a revolution, intoxicated with the beautiful words, Liberty, Equality, Solidarity, would not be a revolution if it maintained slavery at home. Half humanity is subjected to the slavery of the hearth would still have to rebel against the other half (1972:144).

Again, this is not to suggest that Kropotkin's writings are a major source of these kinds of views, only that he put forward similar arguments in an earlier age.

The position of Popper in these broad categories is, perhaps, slightly less obvious. He could be placed with Spencer as just another thinker supporting capitalism from within a wide liberal tradition, but to draw this connection too tightly would be a mistake. One of the most significant elements of Popper's political thought is that he is much clearer about what he opposes than what he supports. It is for this reason that attempts, like Quinton's (1976), to outline his positive social vision seem so unsatisfactory. But the detailed arrangements of Popper's 'Open Society' are never filled in, and cannot be: the 'openness' he promotes is consistent with a whole range of political possibilities. The core of his argument is less concerned with the detailed character of a particular kind of society than with the

now does' (1946:xxii). Nevertheless, Spencer's work is tied to Darwin's, not only because Darwin himself took on Spencer's phrase 'the survival of the fittest' (of which more will be said later), but because Spencer's arguments became embroiled with Darwin's in the later development of social and political thought. If nothing else, even Spencer would have to admit that the power and intellectual significance of the Theory of Organic Evolution lent credence and intellectual support to his own views. Certainly the impact of Spencer's works owed much to their association with Darwinism, and it was as much the 'Darwinian' as the specifically 'Spencerian' elements of his 'synthetic philosophy' which were taken up and developed by later thinkers.

The situation is much clearer in the case of Kropotkin. Although some writers, like Scruton (1983:250), have characterised him as an opponent of Darwinism, this judgement is not supported by an examination of his writings. In fact, Kropotkin has little but praise for Darwin and explicitly points to him as the originator of many of the ideas which are central to Kropotkin's overall argument. In his *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, for example, he says:

Kessler's idea . . . that beside the law of mutual struggle there is in Nature the law of mutual aid, which . . . is far more important than the law of mutual conquest . . . was, in reality, nothing but a further development of the ideas expressed by Darwin himself . . . (and) . . . seemed to me so correct and of so great an importance, that . . . I began to collect materials for further development of the idea. (1972:19)

It is clear in any study of Kropotkin's works that this application of Darwinian ideas, and particularly the concept of 'mutual aid', is basic to his ultimate political position. Furthermore, in his *Ethics* Kropotkin argues that Darwin 'opened a new era in philosophy . . . turned a new page in ethics' because he placed 'the whole subject on such a firm scientific basis' (1968: 32). He even goes so far as to state baldly that 'the starting point for a study of ethics was set by Darwin' (1968: 45). This aristocratic anarchist would have seen no shame in the title 'Social Darwinist'.

The Darwinian element in Popper's social and political thought is not so immediately obvious, but it is no less important. In order to show this it is only necessary to draw out the strength of the connection between Popper's politics and his epistemology. In a very real sense Popper's political position is simply a transference of his epistemological and methodological recommendations for progress in science to the social and political world. As Vernon (1976:264) points out, 'his political recommendations are drawn, not from the subject matter of social science, but from the form of scientific consciousness'. This is most directly obvious in his

arguments against holistic or utopian approaches to planning which are based on his account of the nature and limits of scientific knowledge. Holism and Utopianism, according to Popper, both imply a degree of certainty about the workings of society which is not only unavailable in the social realm, but which is in principle impossible, even in the 'hardest' and most precise areas of science. He also rejects a variety of particular theories on the basis that they are 'unfalsifiable' or rely on 'laws of historical development' which he regards as unscientific and ultimately irrational. His critical arguments, then, largely depend on his epistemological position, and this is also the case with the positive proposals he does put forward.

The link comes through his concept of the 'third world of objective knowledge'. This humanly created world of knowledge contains incoherencies and gaps which set problems for science. In the attempt to overcome these problems hypotheses are developed, tested and either rejected or provisionally accepted. Popper's 'piecemeal social engineering' follows the same process: evils (problems) are identified, policies (hypotheses) are put forward as possible solutions, these are then checked (tested) against actual results and either accepted or rejected on that basis. In Lefevre's (1947:98) words:

At the procedural (or methodological) level falsifiability has its counterpart in the political realm as the principle of trial and error. Politics, like science, is a process of learning by making mistakes . . .

The proper method for political activity, for Popper, is the same as his methodology for scientific progress, and this approach is explicitly Darwinian.

In his *Objective Knowledge*, subtitled *An Evolutionary Approach*, Popper constantly draws out the connection between his theory of knowledge and Darwin's theory of organic evolution, pointing out, for example, that his description of the growth of objective knowledge:

Can be interpreted as a description of biological evolution

. . . The tentative solutions which animals and plants incorporate into their anatomy and behaviour are biological analogues of theories and vice versa. (1974b:145)

Later, he makes this view even more explicit, suggesting that:

the growth of our knowledge is the result of a process closely resembling what Darwin called 'natural selection' . . . the natural selection of hypotheses . . . (and) . . . this interpretation may be applied to animal knowledge, pre-scientific knowledge and scientific knowledge. (1974b:261)

Furthermore, he argues that this approach:

is not meant metaphorically . . . the theory of knowledge I wish to propose is a largely Darwin-

By preserving a system of highly unequal distribution through the state by preserving and extending most of its powers... (and) ourselves who see in the state, both in its present form, in its very essence, and in whatever guise it might appear, an obstacle to the social revolution, the greatest hindrance to the birth of a society based on equality and liberty, as well as the historic means to prevent this blossoming. (1973:211)

The state is the great opponent of freedom and it is only when it is removed by popular revolutionary action that a free society can develop.

But even given this basic agreement on the inequality of the state, the visions of the free society presented by Spencer and Kropotkin are almost polar opposites. This is primarily because of the different elements of the evolutionary scheme they emphasize: for Spencer... the natural world was one of unrestrained competition and extinction of the unfit whilst, for Kropotkin, the natural world was co-operative and harmonious (Jones 1980:77).

The 'struggle for existence' which results in the survival of the fittest' is, in Spencer's view, essentially a competitive battle within society. In this battle those who are better adapted, more integrally a competitive system, are those who will survive and prosper, while those who are unable to adapt will not survive. Ultimately, and through a process of continual selection, society will come to be made up of highly adapted and integrated individuals. In Spencer's (1976:472) words:

Spencer evinced an optimistic faith in the ability of society to evolve spontaneously into a harmonic body of cooperating individuals, but this was coupled with an adherence to a radical brand of laissez-faire to prevent tampering with a natural balance which should be left alone. Freedom, then, would consist in the lack of external authority over individuals who would be responsible for themselves, socialised to occupy a particular role in social life, and the social organisation would be made up of a system of freely entered contractual relationships where the only role of the state would be to defend the natural rights of man — to protect person and property — to prevent the aggressions of the powerful upon the weak — in a word, to administer justice' (quoted in Barker 1978:52-53).

This would be the basic social structure. Only in the family would there be any need for altruism and charity; in the wider sphere they would, like most of the functions of the state, be simply redundant. Kropotkin's 'struggle for existence', in contrast, primarily takes place in another arena. It is not socially a struggle between individuals to attain social goods, but the struggle of society as a whole to produce the goods which all individuals require. In both the human and the animal world, Kropotkin argues, this is most effectively achieved through group effort, co-operation and mutual aid. In a situation of potential abundance for all the state, and the system of private property it supports, prevent the full emergence of the naturally co-operative character of humanity.

One of the immediate ironies revealed by this investigation is the extent of agreement between Spencer and Kropotkin in their respective views of the preconditions for a free society: for both of them it involves an attack upon the role of the state. It is this commonality that explains the degree of respect Kropotkin accords Spencer, reserving his ire for T. H. Huxley's attempt to remove ethics from the revolutionary scheme, which he saw as a misinterpretation of Darwin (1968:284-7). For Spencer, most of the functions performed by the modern state were unnatural: 'they originated in an industrialized society'. Furthermore, the state's many interferences in social life only act to hinder the natural evolutionary forces which will ultimately result in the development of a truly free, and basically self-regulating, social system where the state has, at most, a minimal role (Sabine 1963:724). For Kropotkin, the state is the instrument of oppression, the preserver of the privilege of the few against the legitimate claims of the many. It is on the basis of this view that he distinguishes between:

Yet, even though these thinkers apparently proceed from a common theory of evolution — Darwinism — and seek the same aim — a free society — they arrive at the very different political stances which have already been outlined. Partly this seems to be a product of their differing visions of a free society, and partly of their application and interpretation of the Darwinian thesis. These need to be explicitly Darwinian formulations.

And it is this emphasis on the significance of natural selection which also unites Spencer, Kropotkin and Popper and identifies them as Darwinists. For although both Spencer and Kropotkin wished to retain the Lamarckian notion of the inheritance of acquired characteristics' (and Darwin never fully rejected this principle) (Jones:86), it is the Darwinian view of the process of selection (rather than the origin of) variations which constantly informs their political arguments: both the 'survival of the fittest' and 'mutual aid' are explicitly Darwinian formulations.

The progress that Popper desires in the political realm reflects his view of the growth of knowledge, and in both cases the mechanism is Darwinian: the best hypotheses, or policies, are selected in an environment of harsh and constant criticism.

From the amoeba to Einstein, the growth of knowledge is always the same. (1974b:261)

ary ethic of mutual aid can come into play, freeing people from need, exploitation and enforced obedience to a variety of external authorities. Mutual responsibility to the community provides the basis for real individual freedom.

The relationships between the state, the community and the individual put forward by these two theorists are virtual mirror images. Spencer's vision involves a society composed of almost totally atomised individuals who, through competitive evolutionary struggle, create a community where order becomes the product of the increasing integration of individuals into social life. The state, which has unnaturally (and, necessarily, unsuccessfully) tried to interfere in this process, ultimately has little or no function to perform and virtually withers away: 'the process of evolution . . . would . . . lead eventually to perfect adaptation, perfect equilibrium and perfect freedom' (Barker 1978:52). In Kropotkin's schema, the initial removal of the state allows the development of a community which, through co-operative evolutionary development, provides the conditions required for the development of full individuality. Where Spencer begins with a radical individualism and arrives at a situation where people are so totally integrated into society that, it could be argued, virtually no individualism remains. Kropotkin sees the construction of community as the necessary prerequisite for the development of real individuality.

Popper takes neither of these courses. His 'Open Society' is not built on pure individualism or communitarianism, and the state is neither abolished nor withers away. The basis for freedom and 'openness', for Popper, is essentially freedom of thought, speech and, most importantly, criticism; everything else is secondary. Although there is a kind of 'minimalist state' element in Popper's argument that 'the state is a necessary evil: its powers are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary' (1969:350), the major thrust of his criticism is not directed against the state or government as such, only with particular kinds of states which conduct government in particular ways. It is irrationalism in politics — defined as either the irrational call for the primacy of will found in Fascism, or the equally irrational claim to scientific certainty of Stalinism — which is his enemy. Both deny the validity of criticism, and it is open and constant criticism which Popper identifies as the prime mover in the evolution of knowledge and, hence, the progress of society. And the ultimate basis for this progress is neither the individual nor the community, rather it is the product of a certain kind of relationship between the two. In his system of 'conjectures' and 'refutations' both the individual and the collectivity are vital: the individual to formulate ideas, the community to test, criticise and select them.

This not only requires 'free' individuals (at least in the sense of 'freedom of speech'), but also the existence of a community with a particular charac-

ter: one dedicated to the search for truth and, therefore, open to new ideas, opposed to arbitrary authority and willing to consider all ideas on their merits. Evolution, in this view, is not a product of the triumph of competition or of the triumph of co-operation, but a combination of the two. Harsh competition in the selection of ideas is linked with a communal and co-operative search for the truth. Equally, freedom in the political sphere is not found in the absence of restraints on individual action, nor in a dedication to community, but in the existence of a state with a particular character: a limited government, open to criticism of its policies and aims, rationally seeking the best solution to social problems. Again, harsh competition between aims and policies is linked with a common dedication to social improvement and to the preservation of those conditions which allow the most rapid progress in this direction. The state, then, has a positive role to play, as both the agency for reform and the guardian of freedom.

Now, the point of this investigation is not to make any judgment between these visions of a free society, or even to suggest that such a judgment could ultimately be based on some understanding of the theory of evolution, but only to suggest that this theory is subject to a wide range of interpretations when applied to the social sphere (some, of course, which might be more legitimate than others). Partly this seems to be the product of what might be seen as ambiguities in the theory itself, partly due to the factors of evolution and society which are focused upon, and partly due to the tension between descriptive and prescriptive uses of the theory.

One apparent ambiguity in the theory can be summed up in the contrast between two phrases: 'natural selection' and 'the survival of the fittest'. Only the first of these is truly Darwin's. In the first edition of *The Origin of Species* he says: 'I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term "Natural Selection", in order to mark its relation to Man's power of selection' (Darwin 1966:61). It is only in the 5th edition, published some ten years later, that he (rather generously) adds: 'But the expression often used by Mr. Herbert Spencer of the Survival of the Fittest is more accurate, and is sometimes equally convenient' (Peckham 1959:145).

However, while these two principles are perfectly compatible and the differences between them do not produce any great difficulties in the study of biology, they can be interpreted with very different emphases when applied to social life. 'Natural Selection' stresses the significance of the environment surrounding an organism: there is something external to it — Nature — which makes the selection. 'The survival of the fittest', in contrast, focuses on the internal characteristics of an organism: it has some inherent quality — fitness — which allows it to survive. In emphasising the latter Spencer justi-

solve the problems better than other competing hypotheses then they become part of the 'third world', and the whole process starts again (see his 1974b:106-50). The 'fittest' survive, but what is 'fit' in any particular situation is determined by what has survived in the past. 'Fitness' depends on 'Natural Selection', but 'nature' is also a product of the 'survival of the fittest'. Both competition and co-operation are necessary for real and continued progress in this view. For Popper, the evolution of knowledge (which is the focus of his attention) is a profoundly *social* process: the isolated Robinson Crusoe cannot produce real science, for there is nobody but himself to check his results; nobody but himself to correct those prejudices which are the unavoidable consequences of his particular mental history, nobody to help him to get rid of that strange blindness concerning the inherent possibilities of our own results. . . . (1966:219).

But however we might judge between these different conceptions of the evolutionary scheme, various problems also arise in the different attempts to apply these schemes to social life and to draw political messages from such applications.

In particular, each of these theorists places clear limits on what it is they consider to actually evolve in the process of social evolution. For Spencer it could be described as *character*, for Kropotkin *ethics*, and for Popper *knowledge* (Darwin himself, in *The Descent of Man*, talks of the evolution of 'civilisation', a much broader, if more difficult, notion). Why social evolution, if it operates at all, should be focused in these ways is not clear. Spencer, for instance (and in direct opposition to Popper's view), sees little place for rationally based social reform in his scheme. Character (and for Victorian reformers means upright, responsible, survival of the fittest), it is not, and cannot be, the product of some rationally planned program of social change (Freedson 1976:477). Such attempts at reform are essentially 'unnatural', a consequence of the 'sins of legislators', and can only hinder evolutionary progress. But if this is the case, if attempts at rational reform are 'unnatural', then where do they come from? How can *their* development be explained? Even worse, how can you oppose them without embracing the very process you reject?

Kropotkin faces similar kinds of difficulties. The ethic of 'mutual aid' is not essentially a human construct, it is a product of nature, as much in operation in the non-human as the human world. Humans, then, cannot create this ethic; they can only recognise it in operation. This is what Kropotkin sets out to do in his *ethics*. But, having done this, and also having discovered that there is another ethic operating in nature, the ethic of competition and selfishness, then on what basis can he assert the priority of one ethic over another? His possible reply — that the ethic of 'mutual aid' is progressive, while that of 'competition' is regressive

comes from a rather different balance between these principles in his analysis. Both individual 'fitness' and 'natural selection' are significant in his outline of evolutionary processes, but rather than seeing these as conflicting tendencies he perceives them as complementary. The nature which selects is at any given time is, itself, the product of previous selections. This is particularly clear in his account of the evolution of the 'third world of objective knowledge'. This world is made up of the scientific theories which have survived to the present and contains within it those objective problems which new and creative hypotheses are designed to overcome. If these hypotheses survive criticism and

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— does not solve the problem. This would imply the existence of some other 'meta-ethic' on which such a judgment could be based, and Kropotkin's firm, evolutionary, foundation for ethics has been lost.

Furthermore, this problem flows over into his analysis of political life and action. The aim of the revolution is the eradication of the state and the system of private property it supports; this would allow the development of a society where the ethic of 'mutual aid' and co-operation could flower fully. But the very fact that the state exists and has such power points to the strength of the competitive ethic in human life. How else could the rise of the modern state, and its triumph over those medieval cities which Kropotkin believed to embody principles of mutual aid, be explained, except by showing (as Kropotkin (1973:235-50) does) how these principles were undermined by competitiveness and selfishness. But if Kropotkin admits this strength his case seems to be undermined: why would he expect a revolution to lead to the triumph of an ethic of 'mutual aid' rather than just another manifestation of competitiveness and selfishness? In order to do this, as well as account for the rise of the state in the first place, he needs to call for some other, non-evolutionary, force at work in human affairs. In fact, Kropotkin's historical analysis of the emergence of the modern state (1973:210-64) seems to allow a degree of fortuitousness in human history which, if not totally incompatible with an evolutionary outlook, does not rest easily with the emphasis he places on the significance of 'mutual aid' in social evolution.

Nor does Popper avoid this kind of problem. While focusing on the evolutionary growth of knowledge and the importance of rationality in this process he must also acknowledge the significance of the irrational in human affairs. Indeed, it is what he takes to be irrational and irrationalist approaches to political life which are the subjects of his specifically political works. But, if the development of knowledge is always the same 'from the amoeba to Einstein', how can the irrational emerge with such force? While Popper does not regard real progress as the *inevitable* result of the evolutionary process, accepting that there can be retrograde steps even when his scheme of conjecture and refutation is followed, such mistakes are explicable *within* his account of rationality precisely because rationality cannot produce certainty: rationality is not infallible. But what *evolutionary* process is at work in the creation of the kind of irrationality he finds in Nazi Germany or the Stalinist U.S.S.R.? Surely the development of these kinds of regimes cannot be simply attributed to error: it is what he takes to be a *positive* evil that Popper opposes. How such positively irrational, and even anti-rational, elements can emerge in an evolutionary scheme which, in some sense, is *inherently* rational is, at best, unclear.

This is not to say that these theorists cannot deal with these kinds of problems in other ways, and they all provide such explanations, but only that it seems difficult to see how they can be solved *within* the evolutionary frameworks they have developed. To the extent they are concerned with the identification of forces which they take to be opposed to the whole process of 'natural' evolution rather than just with those potentially regressive elements *in* the evolutionary scheme, they are always faced with the difficulty of explaining either the origin or the strength of these forces. Where to draw the line between what is 'evolutionary' and what is 'non-evolutionary' remains the central difficulty.

Partly this problem seems to arise out of the attempt to use the evolutionary perspective as a prescriptive as well as a descriptive framework. In these three cases 'evolution' has been equated with freedom, and freedom is something which has to be achieved in the face of opposition. In each case it is what allows the possibility of progress through evolution which is identified as central to the whole evolutionary scheme, and the strength of the opposition that is to be overcome is not just something that can be explained by the imperfect workings of evolution (which all acknowledge), but only by reference to something which either seems to oppose the evolutionary process itself, or (and particularly with Kropotkin's notion of some basic conflict between different factors in evolution) which requires the theorist to step outside the evolutionary scheme to make ethical and practical judgements. This implies that an evolutionary framework can only ever provide a partial explanation, which considerably diminishes its force as both description and prescription.

None of this is meant to imply any overall critique of the use of an evolutionary perspective in social and political study. If anything, the negative connotations often attached to 'Social Darwinism' are undeserved, serving to obscure rather than illuminate. Clearly, an evolutionary perspective can be applied in a variety of ways, and this says something about the power and flexibility of that perspective. At the same time, there are a number of difficulties and 'traps' which exist in any attempt to apply Darwin's insights to the social world'. But this does not mean that the attempt should be abandoned: questions about 'human nature', and particularly about the relationships between humanity and nature, can hardly avoid some consideration of Darwinism, even if there is a real need to proceed with caution. If nothing else, the examples I have used indicate that the whole question of the connection and inter-penetration of social and biological thought is worthy of continuing investigation.

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general tendency to mutual aid, which in the great majority of cases benefits both the individual and the group.

7. That such traps also exist in the apparently "harder" science of Biology is evidenced by the long history, and continuation, of disputes about the precise meaning and mechanisms of evolution in the organic world.

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NOTES

1. The connection between Malinussian ideas on population and Darwin's formulation of the Theory of Organic Evolution are particularly interesting in this context. For a more detailed account of the Malinussian position see my "Resurrecting the Dismal Par-

2. Jones' (1980: 194) suggestion that Darwinism might ultimately have highly conservative characteristics (a much less serious claim) also seems to depend more on a consideration of the way in which Darwin has tended to be interpreted by social thinkers than on something which follows necessarily from the theory itself. While it might be true that Darwinism lends itself rather easily to such interpretations, it does not follow that this is the only way in which it might reasonably be used. The discussion of Kropot-

3. This is the case even though Spencer originally advocated the common ownership of land. While this property seem to imply an attack on the rights of property (and, therefore, on capitalism) it was always accompanied by an insistence on total property rights to the fruits of the land and to other kinds of productive capital. In fact it is because of the importance he attaches to ownership that he later repudiates his earlier position on the ownership of land — in a less than ideal society. His argument can more properly be construed as an attack on the landed aristocracy — in defence of the industrial bourgeoisie — than as some kind of incipient socialism. For an account of this element of his thought, as well as discussions of whether any real distinction can be made between the 'early' and the 'later' Spencer, see Gray (1985). Miller (1982) and Paul (1982).

4. For a more detailed account of the way in which ecological perspectives have been used in a political way see my "The Theoretical Structure and Political Character of Environmentalism", unpublished M.A. thesis, U.N.E., 1977.

5. It is interesting to note in this context that Popper also has a 'Lamarckian' element in his view of evolution, at least to the extent that he is willing to concede that 'Lamarckianism' is a kind of approximation to Darwinism. . . . Darwinism, we can say, simulates Lamarckianism" (1974: 149).

6. This view is obviously rather similar to some modern views on the nature of 'group selection' in Biology, but Kropotkin seems to have rather a broader conception of this process than often found in recent accounts of, for example, the evolutionary origins of altruism. Here the major problem is often seen as explaining how behaviour which benefits the group, but may endanger the individual, could be selected in an evolutionary scheme. This would present no real problem in Kropotkin's account of 'mutual aid'. Such self-endangering altruistic behaviour would simply be the occasional expression of the more