

FOREWORD

Few thinkers have left a more complex and ambiguous legacy than Charles Darwin. Unlike most scientific theories, Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural and sexual selection quickly broke free of its scientific moorings and drifted into the public domain. Politicians, social and political philosophers, as well as ideologues of every stripe and every level of sophistication rummaged through Darwinism looking for scientific justification of their own views. Everyone wanted to share Darwin's prestige, and everyone seemed to find what he was seeking. Defenders of capitalism, aristocracy, imperialism, racism, male dominance, liberalism, democracy, and even (as Richard Weikart shows) socialism all conveniently discovered that Darwin just happened to be on their side.

Nowhere was the battle of Darwinisms keener than in Germany, where the victory of Prussian authoritarianism had lent political and social debate a decidedly theoretical cast. Both liberal and conservative opponents of the infant socialist movement argued that natural selection sanctioned a competitive hierarchical society. They equated high social and economic status with biological fitness in the struggle for existence. To them, the contemporary social and political arrangements were natural, any attempt to change them unnatural. Science had spoken, thus ending the discussion--or so they thought.

This view (with countless variations) has come down to us as Social Darwinism, an infelicitous term since any Darwinian inferences about social conditions might legitimately be so called. As Richard Weikart shows, socialists too wrestled with Darwinism, of course claiming its authority for themselves. This "socialist Social Darwinism," which Weikart calls simply socialist Darwinism, has received relatively little attention in the scholarly literature. Weikart's book provides the first detailed analysis of how German socialists (the

key figures in the European socialist movement) came to terms with modern biology. Their central dilemma – how to acknowledge man's animal nature without closing off the vista of fundamental social and political change -- is still with us today. To be sure, the voice of the old Social Democratic left has largely disappeared from political discourse in the West, but the nature/nurture dichotomy, so clearly laid out in Weikart's book, remains the subject of passionate debate.

Weikart shows that we cannot facilely assume that the left must reflexively take its stand on nurture, rejecting Darwinian nature. Recently, the prominent animal-rights activist, Peter Singer, has called for a new "Darwinian left," one that still takes the side of the weak and holds out the prospect of progressive change. But such a socialism would finally abandon the ideal of human perfectability, "its [the left's] utopian ideas replaced by a coolly realistic view of what can be achieved."¹ Singer is picking up the threads of a debate begun in the 1860s in Germany. Now, Richard Weikart has given us a finely wrought intellectual history of the early stages of that debate. His book should be required reading for anyone who wishes to discuss the enduring question of the biological constraints on human progress.

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ENDNOTES

1. Peter Singer, "Darwin for the Left," *Prospect* (June, 1998).