

# The Evolution of Evolution

## Darwin and Human Society

Giancarlo Livraghi – January 2006

There is a lot of discussion about “ethics”. But very few facts to match declared intentions. In this complex and confusing situation, it’s interesting to read the cover article published by *The Economist* on December 20, 2005.

It’s quite remarkable that recent developments in the study of evolution are taken very seriously by a magazine that doesn’t predominantly deal with biology or anthropology (more broadly, philosophy or science) but usually concentrates on economy, society and politics.

The result is an answer to a question that has been discussed for centuries and millennia – and now is even more relevant. Are ethical, social, collaborative values part of human nature? Or do they need to be enforced “from the outside” by philosophical or religious beliefs, laws and rules imposed (more or less arbitrarily) by some authority?

Since the “age of enlightenment” it was clear that the naive concept of the *bon sauvage*, as imagined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wasn’t finding any confirmation in facts or history. It simply isn’t true that human beings, “good” and civilized in their natural state, are made selfish, cruel and barbaric by “modern” institutions.

But it’s equally wrong to believe the opposite assumption: that humanity is “by its own nature” aggressively egoistic, “bad” and violent (that is what is usually defined as “savage”) so that any possibility of civilized society needs to be enforced by power and constriction.

To review this concept we need to move away from the simplistic theories of economics. (The most dogmatic and less experimental of all sciences, so much so that it isn’t very reasonable to call it a “science” – but that is another, ad quite complex, story). Let’s see how *The Economist* helps us to observe the problem from the point of view of evolution – specifically anthropology.

A short introductory article is further developed in an extended (thirty pages) essay that explains in greater detail recent historical and archaeological discoveries and their effects on the study of evolution, leading to very relevant progress basically in agreement with, but considerably ahead of, the initial concepts defined by Charles Darwin.



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The amusing image of a woman on the highest steps has an interesting meaning, though it's only indirectly related to the subject of the article (that she is wearing Christmas attire is because of the date when it was published.) In any case it's clear that in this context "man" means "human being", regardless of gender.

The key resulting fact is that cooperation and mutual benevolence are part of human nature at least as much a selfishness and mischief. The developments in the study of evolution are showing us how radically wrong was the concept of "economic Darwinism" in the nineteenth century. Though it's dismally still influencing some of today's attitudes and beliefs, which are as widespread as they are meaningless.

The "poisoned phrase", "survival of the fittest", explains *The Economist*, was invented before the study of evolution. It was defined by Herbert Spencer as part of economic doctrine. When Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published (in 1859) it was seized by Spencer and other "classic economists" as fake "scientific support" of their obnoxious brainchild.

Over a hundred years ago Herbert Spencer was an early contributor to *The Economist* (that is being published regularly since 1843). It's interesting to find that now "his" magazine, in the light of facts and recent scientific development, is critically reviewing what it had been publishing at his time.

This is how "social Darwinism" was born. It was as hideous a theory as it was scientifically unfounded. It wasn't the traditional *homo homini lupus*, as defined with disgust, over two thousand years ago, by Plautus and by many who quoted him. It was, and too often still is, a shameless glorification of ruthless egoism and exploitation.

*«Capitalists all – explains The Economist – they took what they thought were the lessons of Darwin's book and applied them to human society. Their hard-hearted conclusion, of which a 17th-century religious puritan might have been proud, was that people got what they deserved – albeit that the criterion of desert was genetic, rather than moral. The fittest not only survived, but prospered. Moreover, the social Darwinists thought that measures to help the poor were wasted, since such people were obviously unfit and thus doomed to sink.»*

*«Sadly, the slur stuck. For 100 years Darwinism was associated with a particularly harsh and unpleasant view of the world and, worse, one that was clearly not true – at least, not the whole truth. People certainly compete, but they collaborate, too. They also have compassion for the fallen and frequently try to help them, rather than treading on them. For this sort of behavior, "On the Origin of Species" had no explanation.*

*As a result, Darwinism had to tiptoe round the issue of how human society and behavior evolved. Instead, the disciples of a second 19th-century creed, Marxism, dominated academic sociology departments with their cuddly collectivist ideas – even if the practical application of those ideas has been even more catastrophic than social Darwinism was.»*

Where are we now? In a very different perspective, if we really try to understand human nature instead of indulging in silly commonplace that doesn't live up to what we can learn from history, culture, experience – and now the findings of modern anthropology. This is how it's explained by *The Economist*.

*«But the real world eventually penetrates even the ivory tower.»* The failure of Nineteenth Century theories, combined with the development of new changes, *«has prompted an opening of minds, and Darwinism is back with a vengeance – and a twist. Exactly how humanity became human is still a matter of debate. But there are, at least, some well-formed hypotheses. What these hypotheses have in common is that they rely not on Spencer's idea of individual competition, but on social interaction. That interaction is, indeed, sometimes confrontational and occasionally bloody. But it is frequently collaborative, and even when it is not, it is more often manipulative than violent.»*

*«Modern Darwinism's big breakthrough was the identification of the central role of trust in human evolution.»* It isn't a new notion. It has always been clear, in history and pre-history, that there can't be any humanity without reliable teamwork and shared attitudes. But it's important to find this confirmed and explained, with increasing depth, in recently advanced studies of “the story of man”.

This doesn't only put an end to the believability of nastily clumsy theories such as “social Darwinism”. It also sets a relevant framework for the definition of “the most successful” evolutionary developments. The survival and growth of humankind cannot be based on “total selfishness” or “totally collective” behavior. They need a dynamic combination of individual initiative and social awareness.

It would be naive to imagine that it can be a smooth process, with no contrast and conflict. Or that human nature can be totally dominated by mutual trust, cooperation, caring about “common good”. But it's a proven fact that our species can't survive and develop without those values. Especially if we understand that evolution isn't just a matter of survival – it needs constant advance and improvement.

More comments on this subject are in *Stupidity: instinct or culture?*  
November 2010 – [gandalf.it/stupid/instcult.pdf](http://gandalf.it/stupid/instcult.pdf)