12-2015

Book Review: Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England by Piers J. Hale

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Published Citation

Hodgson, Dennis G. Review of Piers J. Hale, Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Population and Development Review 41, no. 4 (December 2015), pp. 721-724.

PIERS J. HALE
Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 464 p. $45.00.

Most students of population know that Darwin, in his autobiography, credits a fortuitous reading of Malthus's *Essay on Population* for his ideas on "natural selection":

> I soon perceived that selection was the keystone of man's success in making useful races of animals and plants. But how selection could be applied to organisms living in a state of nature remained for some time a mystery to me. In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic enquiry, I happened to read for amusement 'Malthus on Population,' and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here then I had at last got a theory by which to work.[1]

Piers Hale in *Political Descent* makes a strong case that Darwin's decision to base "natural selection" in his landmark *On the Origin of Species* (1859) on Malthus's vision of individuals competing for subsistence in a world incapable of providing for all was not just fortuitous but also quite strategic. Hale sees Darwin as "a deeply political character" who "consciously constructed his theory of evolution by means of natural selection to vindicate and naturalize the political views that he hoped to see widely adopted" (p. 352). At mid-century Darwin was part of a progressive Whig coalition of new industrialists and their middle-class allies who emphasized liberty, tolerance, and free trade when battling with their entrenched Tory opponents, representatives of the landed aristocracy and of tradition, for expanding suffrage. Well before Darwin's 1859 work, various strands of evolutionary thought had made their appearance, many of which accommodated quite rapid biological and social change. Erasmus Darwin, Darwin's grandfather, and other early-nineteenth-century radicals had outlined a process of change in which acquired characteristics could be inherited. Within this perspective the significant changes associated with the move from agriculture to industry were compelling individuals to adopt dramatically new behaviors, ones that could be inherited by their offspring. Within this schema a "new man" could quickly emerge and societies could undergo rapid transformations.

Hale contends that when Darwin was writing *On the Origin of Species* he felt the need to distance his new theory from the taint of political radicalism associated with such past thought. Darwin's goal was acceptance in the halls of academia and the larger society. Employing a "Malthusian" selection process where individuals were forced to compete for subsistence in a world of limited resources produced a theory of evolutionary change less compatible with a radical political agenda. Biological change required the working of differential mortality rates over the course of many generations and was necessarily a gradual process. "Malthusian" natural selection also gave competition a central role in the process, aligning it more closely with the

moral foundation of ascendant capitalism. To further shield his theory from those who might see in it an unacceptable political message, Darwin consciously excluded any discussion of human evolution in this first exposition of his theory, recognizing that its inclusion would likely prove problematic.

After his theory had gained widespread acceptance Darwin did turn to this topic, publishing *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871. By this time the excesses of unfettered competition in the capitalist system were becoming more obvious and a subject of great political debate in Great Britain. Darwin's treatment of evolution in humans, a social species in which individuals necessarily fulfilled their basic needs through interaction with fellow group members, contributed to this new debate. Darwin argued that natural selection did not work along simple Malthusian lines in humans. At the group level, cooperation, not individual struggle, often enhanced survival chances (Hale, p. 132). In fact, in a group context "natural selection" could become a force for moral behavior, favoring individual altruistic actions that enhance group survival chances while simultaneously running counter to the best interest of the individual actor. Darwin traced the origin of other-regarding behaviors in humans to a variety of sources, all quite distinct from the self-interested individual actor implicit in the Malthusian selection process. He thought that parental and filial affections that induced individuals to undergo great sacrifices for close kin were instinctual, instincts that in the case of humans had gradually broadened to include groups increasingly larger than the immediate family. He also argued that in humans a distinct sexual selection process emerged from the struggle for progeny that also fostered other-regarding behaviors. Darwin contended that female choice was common in many human groups and that females tended to select as mates those males best able to defend and support them. This tendency worked to establish "heroic" other-regarding traits within the male population. In the end, according to Hale, Darwin elaborated in *Descent of Man* an evolutionary theory that offered support for "the foundation of liberal humanistic ethics, of a politics that would spread from the family to the tribe, to the nation and race, and eventually to include men and women of all races" (p. 148). The political lessons buried in *Descent of Man* clearly were different from those in *On the Origin of Species*.

Hale's major thesis in *Political Descent* is that two "rival traditions of evolutionary politics" were evident in the work of Victorian writers, one "deeply Malthusian" that considered evolutionary change to be the result of individuals responding to severe competition for subsistence and the other "predominantly Lamarckian and anti-Malthusian" that considered evolution to be the result of cohesive groups adapting to changed conditions largely through cooperation and mutual aid (pp. 2–3). An assistant professor in the Department of the History of Science at the University of Oklahoma, Hale offers a close textual analysis of a broad range of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writings. In addition to those of Charles Darwin, he discusses in some detail the works of Erasmus Darwin, William Godwin, Malthus, Harriet Martineau, Robert Chambers, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, Alfred Russell Wallace, Walter Bagehot, W. R. Greg, Francis Galton, Thomas Huxley, Benjamin Kidd, Karl Pearson, Friedrich Weismann, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Peter A. Kropotkin, and others. Although Malthus, not Darwin, appears in the subtitle to this volume, his role is secondary. Hale reminds us that Darwin actually was reading the sixth edition of Malthus's *Essay on Population* when in 1838 he unearthed his

"Malthusian" theory of natural selection. Unlike in the first edition (1798), Malthus in the greatly expanded sixth edition (1826) identified moral ways for humans to avoid having their numbers press upon the means of subsistence. Yet in *On the Origin of Species* Darwin constructed "natural selection" around the inevitability of a struggle for existence that Malthus had outlined in the first edition. Throughout this volume Hale uses the term "Malthusian" to refer to Malthus's thought circa 1798.

Hale's treatment of these Victorian writers is largely chronological, and he consistently provides information on their social class background and friendship networks. He sketches the political environment surrounding the appearance of each work and reports on its reception. Considering the quite varied genres involved—from literature to philosophy to science—constructing a framework capable of simply classifying the "political" content of each work's evolutionary thinking is a challenging proposition. Hale's two "rival traditions of evolutionary politics," the Malthusian and the anti-Malthusian, is a bold attempt that does work to simplify things. Darwin, the central figure Hale examines, manages to straddle both traditions, and the changes in his evolutionary thought over time become a way of highlighting the influence a changed political environment can have on the thought of a single writer. Most authors Hale treats fall more cleanly into one or the other of the two rival political traditions. Some questions remain, however, as to whether Hale's framework successfully captures the political intent of every writer. When examining Darwin's work, Hale makes a strong case that his early use of the "Malthusian" tradition had a politically conservative intent and that his later move toward the "anti-Malthusian" tradition had a more liberal or even radical intent. With other writers, however, this link between choice of evolutionary tradition and place on the political spectrum seems less clear.

Consider the case of Herbert Spencer. Students of population know him for his 1852 evolutionary explanation of fertility decline: pressure of numbers on the availability of subsistence stimulates a progressive increase in "civilization" that entails "an enlargement of nervous centers" in individuals and ultimately a decline in fertility.[2] Simply put, living in societies growing more complex and "advanced" induces physiological changes that lower fertility and that are passed on to offspring. Hale contends that Spencer's original mid-century evolutionary theory embraces the thought of "Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin," and is a "Godwinian rejection of Malthusian conclusions." He notes that while Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," he did so to describe Darwin's theory of evolution, not his own, and that even after 1860, when Spencer attempted to incorporate a "Malthusian" version of natural selection into his own theory, he always did so "half-heartedly." Hale, faithful to his framework, categorizes Spencer politically as a "utopian socialist, not a social conservative" (p. 105). This is fine, but are those who label many of the policy positions Spencer took throughout his career "conservative" incorrect? Spencer stridently objected to governments providing populations with schools, sewers, vaccination campaigns and even lighthouses, which he considered just crutches for incompetent captains. Hale argues convincingly that Spencer took these position because he truly believed that the individual was "infinitely malleable" and that the greatest progressive change would come if the individual were maximally allowed "the exercise of his or her agency" in nature's harsh environment, unmoderated by state interventions. But many "conservative" writers working within Hale's "Malthusian tradition" favored

similar policies, although they did so because they believed that unbridled competition creates the survival of the fittest that alone could feed evolutionary change. If a utopian socialist and a social conservative can recommend the same set of policies, albeit for different "theoretical" reasons, are these policies somehow simultaneously "radical" and "conservative"? Or do the policies themselves possess a political identity? In any case, the fit between each tradition's perceived evolutionary mechanism and its political content appears to be looser than Hale's framework suggests.

Hale does succeed in demonstrating that those who outlined grand theories of evolutionary change still remain embedded in particular places and times and rarely resisted the temptation to draw contemporary policy "lessons" from their timeless grand theories. He recognizes that the interplay between theory and policy is often a complicated one, especially for the science of biology whose object of investigation includes the very scientist doing the observing. Can an individual's contemporary policy preferences influence the nature of the theory he constructs? Hale clearly believes this to have been the case among Victorian writers on evolution, and, in the Introduction, he explicitly contends that a significant political component underlies the debates that biologists are having today about whether natural selection primarily acts upon genes, individuals, or groups. In the Afterword he acknowledges that we live in highly partisan times and that, at least in the United States, significant political debate still surrounds Darwin and his theory of evolution. Hale's position on this debate is interesting. He decries conservative Christian attacks on Darwin's character, especially claims that he was a racist and a sexist, responding that Darwin's views were actually at the most progressive end of the Victorian political spectrum. What he does not address are the conservative Christian attacks on Darwin's theory as being essentially a political document. Addressing this attack actually would be difficult for Hale since he ends his volume with the observation that "the science of biology is not an objective endeavor, and thus we need to approach any science of humanity with a deeply skeptical eye." The great irony is that the most appreciative audiences for Hale's excellent scholarship might very well be historians of science and Christian conservatives. It provides the first group with deep insight into the origins of Darwin's thought and the second with their best ammunition yet with which to attack the scientific legitimacy of Darwin's theory.

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Notes

1 Charles Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin: Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1887), p. 68.

2 Herbert Spencer, "A theory of population, deduced from the general law of animal fertility," *Westminster Review* 57 (1852), pp. 468–501.