



Sympathy, evolution, and *The Economist*[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Why did the classical economists' doctrine of innate human sociability and the problem of factions disappear? The social Darwinists who clustered around *The Economist* regarded sympathy, the social glue of small groups, as an impediment to racial perfection that allowed the "unfit" to survive. Classical political economists responded to the problem of factions by proposing that sympathetic concerns be extended to those outside the faction. Social Darwinists advocated narrowing sympathetic concerns. Although social Darwinism faded, sympathy was not returned to its early prominence and economists lost the ability to explain small group formation and the tyranny of the minority.

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"I am utterly astonished that so few people seem to read *Spencer*, & the utter ignorance there seems to be among politicians & political economists of the grand views & logical stability of his works. He appears to me as far ahead of John Stuart Mill as J.S.M. is of the rest of the world, and I may add as Darwin is of Agassiz."

A.R. Wallace to Charles Darwin 2 January 1864

1. Introduction

The claim that humans spontaneously form groups had been long absent from economics when F.A. Hayek revived economic thinking in the Scottish tradition. At the outset, he remarked on the "silliest of the common misunderstandings" (Hayek, 1946, p. 6) about individualism, the supposition that "individualism postulates . . . self-contained individuals, instead of starting from men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society" (Hayek, 1946, p. 6).

Adam Smith characterized humans as unique amongst animals because they connect with others through trade and talk. From this characterization of humans as sympathetically connected with others, Smith developed his system of natural liberty (Levy and Peart, 2008). Hayek's project, much like Smith's, was to explain how humans develop from co-operating

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within a small group to co-operating with all of civilization (Hayek, 1966). At the same time, both Smith and Hayek were concerned with the problem of factions, small groups with unitary goals. If humans naturally form a group with those close to them, then by its superior ability to cooperate, the small group can exploit the larger group. Hayek's later writing, (e.g., Hayek, 1973) focused on this tyranny of the minority, interest-group democracy.

Between the Scottish period and Hayek's revival, sympathy became a staple of 18th and 19th century theory of mind as developed by Scottish philosophers, including Smith's colleague Dugald Stewart, and two generations of Stewart's students, James and John Stuart Mill.¹ Sympathy is central to James Mill's explanation for how small groups can exploit large ones. The Scottish philosophers wished to extend the range of sympathy to all mankind (Mill, 1829, 2:278) and, as such, they became identified with philanthropy (Peart and Levy, 2005).

Why did the doctrine of innate human sociability disappear, and where did the problem of factions go? Hayek conjectured that between the period of classical economics and the mid-20th century, cultural evolutionary arguments were misdirected by "social Darwinists" (Hayek, 1973, p. 23). We suggest that in fact social Darwinists came to regard sympathy, the social glue of small groups, as an impediment to racial perfection because it allowed the "unfit" to survive (Peart and Levy, 2005, 2008). This is where the problem of factions, revived by Hayek, became so important. In the period of classical political economy the response to the problem of small groups was, by one method or another, to widen the sympathetic concerns of the members of the small group (Peart and Levy, 2005; Levy and Peart, 2008). The social Darwinist response was, by one method or another, to narrow the sympathetic concerns (Peart and Levy, 2005; Levy and Peart, 2006). When social Darwinism faded into obscurity, the concept of sympathy was not returned to its early prominence; consequently, economists lost the key to explaining small group formation.

In what follows, we argue that the person most identified in the popular imagination with "social Darwinism," Herbert Spencer, was in fact no such thing (Richards, 1987; McCann, 2004; Peart and Levy, 2005). Instead, Spencer's phrase "survival of the fittest" should be read in the context of his doctrine that as sympathy flourishes, "natural selection" is superseded by another, human law of social development (Peart and Levy, 2005, pp. 220–222). For Spencer, the extension of sympathy to encompass universal concern for others is evidence of a fully developed race. Humans become civilized through the development of language and sympathy. Most importantly, and in line with Hayek's later position, there is for Spencer no fixed distinction between physical and cultural evolution. Indeed, for Spencer evolution moves at the speed of language acquisition.

Hayek wrote little on Spencer. Intriguingly, we know from a report of the preliminary introduction of *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek's most explicitly evolutionary book, that Hayek regarded Spencer as following an approach similar to his own, though he "no longer remembered what he learned" from Spencer.² Spencer, in fact, developed his blend of physical and cultural evolution from the sympathetic principle in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Richards, 1987, p. 259; McCann, 2004, pp. 97–98; Peart and Levy, 2005).

We begin by looking briefly at Smith's extensive discussion of faction (Levy and Peart, 2009). In his account occupation forms a natural basis of association that can easily turn into a combination with a deleterious effect on the happiness of a wider community (Levy and Peart, 2008). The happiness of the wider community is the norm for Smith, so he proposes reforms that have the effect of widening sympathy.

The loss of sympathy is tied up with the question of how ideas of race entered into 19th century economics. A critical step occurred when Darwin's *Descent of Man* proposed that concern for the "greatest happiness" be replaced with concern for the "greatest good," which is defined as racial perfection effected through "natural selection" (Richards, 1987, pp. 217–219, Peart and Levy, 2005; Levy and Peart, 2008).³ Darwin's unpublished letter to Charles Bradlaugh reaffirmed his published opposition to contraception as an impediment to racial perfection also expressed his concern that the cultural institution of marriage be influenced by the same consideration of racial perfection (Peart and Levy, 2008).

When Wallace wrote in 1864 that humans are not subject to the law of natural selection because, as sympathetic beings, they do not let the unfit perish,⁴ W.R. Greg countered that humans should therefore be less sympathetic (Peart and Levy,

¹ Hayek cites Stewart's sympathy as imitation theory and not Smith's rather more famous account of sympathy: "The main difficulty which has to be overcome in accounting for these phenomena is most clearly seen in connection with the phenomenon of imitation. . . . The aspect which concerns us here probably has not again been stated more clearly since it was pointed out at the end of the 18th century by Dugald Stewart. [Hayek cites: Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, chapter on 'Sympathetic Imitation']" Hayek (1963, pp. 46–47). The difference between Hume's and Smith's sympathetic principle is explored in Peart and Levy (2005).

² Quoted in Ebenstein (2001, p. 384). Spencer is not in the index of the published *Fatal Conceit* (Hayek, 1989). The *Fatal Conceit* is discussed extensively in Ebenstein (2003) and Caldwell (2004) without connection to Spencer. Spencer is not connected to Hayek's cultural evolution in the recent papers in Backhaus (2005).

³ Darwin (1871, p. 125): "The term, general good, may be defined as the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are subjected. . . . it would be advisable, if found practicable, . . . to take the standard of morality, the general good or welfare of the community, rather than the general happiness, but this definition would perhaps require some limitation on account of political ethics."

⁴ About the non-humans Wallace writes, "There is, as a general rule, no mutual assistance between adults, which enables them to tide over a period of sickness. Neither is there any division of labor; each must fulfil all the conditions of its existence, and, therefore, 'natural selection' keeps all up to a pretty uniform standard." This situation is immediately contrasted with humans: "But in man, as we now behold him, this is different. He is social and sympathetic. . . . The action of natural selection is therefore checked; the weather, the dwarfish, those of less active limbs, or less piercing eyesight, do not

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