
Commentary

The descent of Darwin

Noel Castree (2009) regrets that academic geographers let pass without much fuss, the sesquicentenary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. In part, this is the voice of Madison Avenue admonishing the sales team for missing a glorious promotional opportunity: 'buy evolution, get geography free'. Castree has also a more serious point to make in remarking that Darwin used geographical reasoning to fundamentally alter the way people think about human life on earth. These issues still matter and Castree implies that the neglect of Darwin is part of geography's more general failure to engage critically with the sort of big-picture views of life on earth that could gain the discipline the popular attention it deserves.

Felix Driver (2010) cautions that traditions are ambivalent, noting that, within British geography at least, the blessed memory of Darwin was invoked recently in support of the decidedly unintellectual endeavours of the geographer as explorer. Driver also shows that historical geographers have indeed been prominent in writing on the reception of Darwin's ideas in diverse times and places. He might have gone further and pointed out that geographers have also engaged with the modern broadly Darwinian big-picture views of the evolution of global human society. There continue to be serious intellectual issues at stake here (Blaut, 2000; Harvey, 1996; Kearns, 2004).

With the thinnest veneer of qualification, environmental determinism is back in vogue. Jeffrey Sachs (2000, page 1) broaches the question of "tropical underdevelopment" with this dramatic assertion:

"[e]conomies in tropical ecozones are nearly everywhere poor, while those in temperate ecozones are generally rich. And when temperate economies are not rich there is typically a straightforward explanation, such as decades under communism or extreme geographical isolation."

The centuries of colonialism endured by many of the tropical economies and current unfair terms of trade are clearly not a 'straightforward explanation', and one of the most powerful of public intellectuals, responsible for shock-doctrine free-market strategies in Latin America in the 1980s and in the Soviet Union in the 1990s (Klein, 2007), and shaper of the UN Millennium Project in the 2000s, identifies nature as the cruel shaper of development challenges.

Alongside the environmental determinism of popular economic geography, we see a family resemblance in popular political geography. Realist theory in international relations explains the patterns of global diplomacy and war in terms of the relative strengths of states or alliances of states as mediated by their propinquity (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). For the journalist, Robert Kaplan, the real basis of state power lies in geography; spatial relations of accessibility by land or sea together with the disposition of natural resources across the globe. Kaplan's argument is that population growth and resource depletion are shattering the system of states created out of former colonies and that now these regions are devolving back to a primordial, Malthusian tribalism (Kaplan, 1994). In this context the struggle between superpowers is in large part about who will exercise tutelage over these tribes, the benign West or the despotic East, and in this battle between freedom and tyranny the geographical relations between powers are once again broadly those described by the social-Darwinist geographer, Halford Mackinder (Kaplan, 2009).

In this respect, it becomes important to engage not only with the descendants of Darwin in the manner suggested by Driver but also to reanimate the legacy of those who were critical of the conservative uses to which Darwinian theory was put in the past and to which it is again being put in the present (Kearns, 2009). This conservative use of geographical determinism naturalizes colonialism, treating global inequalities as an outcome of environmental circumstances; excuses the use of force as the only available way to act in a world shaped by the survival of the most bellicose; and rests ultimately upon a claim to national exceptionalism because in a world of contending states the only justification for denying others survival in our own interest must be that we deserve survival more than do they. Furthermore, this national exceptionalism ignores internal inequalities inviting all citizens to bask in the glory of being number one even while the demonization of the foreign other is pursued with justifications that cut within as well as without the body politic, as Jasbir Puar (2007) shows so effectively in writing of the homonormativity of current US exceptionalism.

The legacy of Élisée Reclus and of Peter Kropótkin is at least as useful for modern geographical inquiry as is the study of “Darwin and his epigones” (Castree, 2009, page 2295). Of course, the socialist and anarchist tradition has had difficulties of its own including the statist traditions of some adherents of the first and a belief in the benign effects of settler colonialism among some adherents of the second. Nevertheless, Reclus and Kropótkin criticized contemporary accounts of global society written under the sign of Darwinian biology and provided alternative stories that focused upon solidarity, cooperation, and respect for life in all its forms (Giblin, 2005). Their scholarly works provided the intellectual basis for believing that another world was possible because there was always more to human relations than competition, more to social identity than national chauvinism, and more to natural husbandry than mining. There still is.

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