

BOOK REVIEW

Piers J. Hale, *Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 465 pp.

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In 1969, the historian Robert Young published a pioneering article, “Malthus and the Evolutionists,” which led historians of science to further investigate the relationship between politics and evolutionary thought. Charles Darwin and Thomas Malthus, with few exceptions, have been central to this study. Darwin himself was explicit about Malthus’s influence on his own theory of evolution by natural selection, but scholars have long disputed the precise relationship between Malthus(ianism) and Darwin(ism). Whereas scholars such as Ernst Mayr (*One Long Argument*, 1991) have argued that the impact of Malthus on Darwinism was far from decisive, others such as Adrian Desmond and James Moore (*Darwin*, 1991) have emphasized Malthus’s crucial role in the formation of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Piers Hale’s *Political Descent* accords with the latter position, but he points out that in focusing exclusively on Malthus’s influence on Darwin, historians have tended to ignore the “anti-Malthusian” tradition. Both Malthusian and anti-Malthusian traditions, Hale argues, were properly considered to be “Darwinian.” Hale’s *Political Descent* is thus an ambitious attempt to compose a comprehensive intellectual history embracing both the Malthusian and anti-Malthusian traditions of evolutionary thought.

As the subtitle suggests, the main character of *Political Descent* is Malthus, rather than Darwin, and the focus is the *politics* of evolution, not evolution. Hale insists that evolutionary biologists and their theories have always been deeply political. This belief arises from his observation of the current debates on evolutionary theory, and it leads him to track the political origin of these evolutionary controversies. In this book, thus, Hale shows how the two rival traditions emerged, and how they developed from the early decades of the nineteenth century to the First World War. He contends that “from 1859 there existed two rival evolutionary politics in Victorian England: the one, deeply Malthusian, which focused upon the adaptation of the individual through struggle [...]; the other, radical and predominant Lamarckian and

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anti-Malthusian, that tended to emphasize the role of social cohesion” (pp. 6-7). This simple rivalry framework certainly has its advantage as it offers a comprehensive picture of how Darwinism came to be intertwined with both Victorian liberalism and its radicalism. Although not entirely novel, Hale’s book does offer an insightful intellectual history by reworking a wide spectrum of primary and secondary sources with which historians of science and political thought are already familiar. He systematically navigates all the points where evolutionary thought and politics met, and skillfully draws an intellectual genealogy of the politics of evolution in Victorian England. This simple framework, however, also has its disadvantages.

The rivalry framework of the Malthusian and the anti-Malthusian traditions does not quite fit many of the characters in this book, because they shared certain beliefs with both sides. In such cases, Hale concentrates on revealing their anti-Malthusianism, because in his view, historians have emphasized their Malthusian quality, sometimes leading to misidentification. The most striking example of this is Herbert Spencer. Like most other figures in *Political Descent*, Spencer is portrayed as being deeply political in character. In chapter two, Hale identifies Spencer as a “Godwinian.” He maintains the view that “Spencer became a major figure among those radicals who ultimately found Godwin more compelling than Malthus in their understanding of the human condition” (p. 105). William Godwin, an English political philosopher, is considered one of the originators of the anti-Malthusian tradition. Indeed, Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) was a response to Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793), and it generated a debate between them. Hale sees this debate as a major source of both the Malthusian and the anti-Malthusian traditions; while Malthus influenced Victorian liberals, Godwin became an intellectual source for radicals. Emphasizing Godwin’s influence on Spencer inevitably leads Hale to identify Spencer as a “utopian socialist” (p. 105). This identification, however, is as misleading as identifying him as a “social Darwinist,” popularized in Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944). As Robert Richards argued earlier in his book, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (1987), Spencer was not a social Darwinist, but nor was he a socialist.

Spencer’s case is an extreme one. In many other cases, Hale tries to be more objective. But his reliance on the (anti-)Malthusian framework occasionally prevents him from absorbing an integrated understanding of the philosophy. Many Victorian thinkers who embraced Malthus’s pessimistic view of the human condition did not share his opposition to the Poor Laws; instead, they believed that cooperation and charity based on compassion (or other-regarding) could improve society. Not only Darwin, Alfred Wallace, and Spencer, but also many political theorists including John Stuart Mill and Harriet Martineau shared this belief. Thus, they can hardly be classified either as Malthusian or as anti-Malthusian. Hale must have recognized this difficulty. He certainly tries to show that there was no clear line between the Malthusian and anti-Malthusian traditions. In chapter four, for example, Hale argues that

not all Malthusians (liberals) rejected Lamarckism, which was favored by anti-Malthusians, and that not all anti-Malthusians (socialists) rejected natural selection, admitting that “for the most part the distinction was a matter of emphasis” (p. 343). Despite this recognition, Hale nevertheless often classifies works as strictly Malthusian or anti-Malthusian. Darwin is a good example.

In chapter three, Hale compares Darwin’s two major works, *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Interestingly, Hale reads opposite political implications into natural selection in *Origin* and sexual selection in *Descent*; the former was related to the Malthusian tradition, and the latter to the anti-Malthusian. He argues that embracing Malthus in *Origin* was Darwin’s strategy to distance “himself and his theory from the revolutionary elements of the radical movement” (p. 115), but since Darwin “recognized the importance of charity, compassion, and [...] a limited amount of state regulation” in human society (p. 115), he had to introduce sexual selection in *Descent* “to account for the evolution and persistence of other-regarding morals” (p. 111). From this perspective, Darwin’s theory of evolution was constructed to convey his political vision. Indeed, Hale argues that Darwin “consciously constructed his theory of evolution [...] to vindicate and naturalize the political views that he hoped to see widely adopted” (p. 352). Although this argument is convincing, identifying *Origin* as Malthusian and *Descent* as anti-Malthusian lead him to ignore the continuity between the two works, failing to reach an integrated understanding of Darwin’s theory of evolution.

These problems are, in my view, an inevitable consequence of unclearly defining “(anti-)Malthusian.” Although Hale makes Malthus the main character of his book, he provides neither a clear definition of “(anti-)Malthusian,” nor a detailed analysis of Malthus’s *Essay* itself. This ambiguity enables him to use the (anti-)Malthusian framework in a very loose way. In fact, Hale simply tends to link the Malthusian tradition to liberalism, and the anti-Malthusian to radicalism, and to use “anti-Malthusian” as a substitute for “Lamarckian.” This framework works relatively well with the ideals of Peter Kropotkin, but not with many other philosophers. What makes the situation even worse is that Hale attempts to cover almost all of the major evolutionary and political thinkers of the Victorian era. Limited space does not allow an examination of each one’s views in detail, and the unsophisticated framework helps Hale to classify those who seem to fall between the Malthusian and anti-Malthusian traditions somewhat arbitrarily, or to see their thoughts as a mixture of the two. In sum, the line between the Malthusian and anti-Malthusian traditions of evolutionary thought in Hale’s book is not as clear as Hale intends to show.

These flaws, however, are moderate costs for the values that *Political Descent* offers. The greatest achievement of this book is to provide a comprehensive intellectual history of the politics of evolution, especially emphasizing that the anti-Malthusian tradition of evolution existed in Victorian England. It challenges and complements Daniel Todes’s *Darwin without Malthus* (1989), in which he contrasted the Malthusian evolutionary thought in England to the anti-Malthusian one in Russia. In

addition to this, this history is particularly useful for understanding the current disputes in evolutionary theory, such as adaptationism vs. pluralism and gene selection vs. group selection. It not only describes the historical origins of those controversies, it also makes a convincing argument that evolutionary thought has always been intertwined with politics. Most of today's evolutionary biologists who participate in the evolutionary debates, such as Richard Dawkins and Richard Lewontin, are evidently political, just as their intellectual ancestors were. Like Darwin, they may consciously construct the evolutionary theory to vindicate and naturalize their political views. At the end of *Political Descent*, Hale contends 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, considering that there is so much at stake" (p. 353). This provocative claim invites historians of science to ponder upon the history of evolutionary politics. I expect *Political Descent* to become a basis for more focused and more sophisticated studies of the politics of evolution.