

Human-nature

The term *human-nature* is widely used as a term of denigration against those who claim that it is possible for the human species to live harmoniously in a system of relationships based on co-operation, instead of the system of competition (capitalism) that exists at present. When human-nature is mentioned it is assumed that what is meant is an ineradicable factor of aggression, violence, competition and acquisitiveness contained in the human make-up and which is sometimes also regarded as a manifestation of the Christian doctrine of original sin. Before we go into the question of what the term really refers to, we must ask ourselves why it is that this term is used in the way it is in our society.

Chattel slavery and racism

With the break-up of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD, chattel slavery came to an end and was superseded in Europe by the serfdom of the feudal system. For some historians a period of relative stagnation descended upon Europe they call “the Dark Ages”, lasting until the 13th century. During this time feudal Europe became dependent upon the importation of large quantities of spices, there being no winter root vegetables to feed the cattle most of which had to be killed every autumn and preserved in salt and spices. This trade came from the Far East via the Red Sea, over the isthmus of Suez and into the Mediterranean, thus ensuring the pre-eminence of the Italian and French mediterranean ports. However, the increasing domination of the Ottoman Turks over the Middle East from the 11th century culminated in the virtual closing of the trade routes to the East. The consequent desire to find a new trade route to the spice islands via the sea determined the so-called “discoveries” (the American continent was of course populated with *homo sapiens* long before Europeans arrived on the scene) of the West Indies and the American continent by Columbus and Cabot and the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by Vasco Da Gama in the late 15th century.

Unlike Columbus who pursued a course straight across the open Atlantic Ocean, the Portuguese explorers tried to find a route around the African continent. They made many voyages and slowly worked their way around the coast, taking more than fifty years to reach the most southern point, the Portuguese navigator Diaz accomplishing this in 1487. This brought them into contact with the West African slave kingdoms of Dahomey, Ashanti and Benin, the rulers of which were quite prepared to sell black slaves to the “white” European traders who followed behind the explorers. By 1517 the Portuguese and Spanish were carrying slaves to work in the colonies in the Caribbean.

There were however moral reactions in Europe and the American colonies against the slave trade. The Catholic Church at that time granted legal possession of any new territory discovered to the country financing the expenditure on condition that those natives embracing Christianity were not enslaved. As the slave trade became more lucrative the practice of freeing slaves who professed Christianity gradually died out, with the agreement and help of the Church. A new theory of superiority and inferiority developed and Europeans began to talk of black and brown-skinned native populations as sub-human and related to apes rather than humans. Doctrines of intellectualized pseudo-science arose to justify this.

Darwinism versus Social Darwinism

Although Charles Darwin already knew in 1837 that evolution was an inescapable conclusion to

be drawn from the evidence he had accumulated, he did not allow himself to proceed any further with his discovery until he had found an explanation for the fact of adaptation. The solution had occurred to him and was re-inforced after he had read Malthus's *Essay on Population*. So, curiously, Malthus's theory of population, which was to become the tenuous foundation for Social Darwinism, helped to lay the basis for the theory of evolution by natural selection some time before the Darwinian theory was declared in 1859 with the publication of *The Origin of Species*.

Natural selection is a process of adaptation in response to the environment, or changes in the environment, at a very slow quantitative process of modification over a great number of generations, so that in the course of time an entire species could change qualitatively, forming a new species. Conflict is not involved in such a struggle for survival. It is a struggle for existence (as Darwin termed it) only in the sense that every organism strives to maintain itself and does so willy-nilly in relation to other organisms. Darwin himself stated that he used the term in a large and metaphorical sense which included dependence of one being upon another (symbiosis) and embraced not only the life of the individual but, more importantly, success in leaving progeny. Therefore, although the mechanism of natural selection takes place in the life process of an individual organism the end result of survival manifests itself in the evolutionary emergence and maintenance of a new species.

However, because of the attitudes of some of Darwin's most devoted followers (foremost among them being Thomas Henry Huxley) his theories were mis-stated and misrepresented, and these misrepresentations were seized upon by supporters of capitalism and negro chattel slavery to justify exploitation. It was Herbert Spencer who first spoke, in his theory of sociology, of "the survival of the fittest". Darwin's theories were also used to defend Friedrich Nietzsche's doctrine of the superman with whom fittest was equated.

Even before the appearance of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, a disgruntled French aristocrat, Count Joseph Arthur De Gobineau published a book 1853-57, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, in which he attempted to justify the subordinate economic and social position of the peasantry and the working class on the grounds of their alleged biological inferiority. This nonsense of De Gobineau's was given new apparent validity with the advent of Social Darwinism and was used by Houston Stewart Chamberlain and his father-in-law Richard Wagner to justify the false idea of German racial superiority, later taken up by Hitler and the Nazis and used by them to treat as subhuman large groups of people on false biological, ethnological and religious grounds.

After the war of 1939-45 ideas of inherent class superiority and inferiority became less popular. UNESCO published a series of pamphlets dealing with the racial question and written by the foremost members of every branch of natural science, all of which, on the basis of scientific assessment, condemned all acts of discrimination based upon alleged biological inferiority as erroneous.

For a time capitalism went through a period of economic boom in which industrial Europe invited in millions of immigrants from what are now called the Third World countries to relieve the relative shortage of labour-power caused by the war. However, with the decline of world trade resulting in rising unemployment from the late 50s onwards, together with worsening

conditions and standards of living for the working class, conflict arose with violence and discrimination directed against immigrant groups in Britain and the rest of Europe. It was during this period that Neo-Social Darwinism made its appearance; prominent among its advocates were Konrad Lorenz, Anthony Storr, Robert Ardrey and Desmond Morris.

The ideas of the new Social Darwinists are a rehash of some of those of the old (Nature red in tooth and claw) and involve the use of erroneous and unscientific methods to justify them. The most favoured way of doing this was, first, to take the behaviour of some people in capitalist society (described as aggressive, territorial and acquisitive) as being the natural norm for all, and then plant it upon our unsuspecting lower animal ancestors as innate or instinctual, and finally, having done that, to claim that this alleged instinct for aggression and the rest is what we humans have inherited genetically from our animal forebears. Unfortunately for the validity of this assertion of theirs, painstaking work in the field and scientific analyses by George B. Schaller, Jane Van Lawick-Goodall and Dian Fossey on the nature and behaviour of our nearest primate relatives, the anthropoid Apes (chimpanzee, gorilla and orangutan), has shown unequivocally that these animals do not fundamentally possess any of the characteristics of aggression and the rest that have been attributed to them (see their books *The Mountain Gorilla*, *In the Shadow of Man*, and *Gorillas in the Mist*).

However, in spite of the efforts of UNESCO and the debunking of Social Darwinism, old and new, there still remains widespread belief in many erroneous conceptions about the nature and behaviour of the human species, an amalgam of Social Darwinism and upper-class prejudice. It is assumed that those in society who are “successful” (that is to say, have more than enough capital to make it possible for them to live without having to be employed) are biological superior (solely because of that “success”) in comparison to those others in society who are economically forced to earn a living by selling their ability to work. It is no coincidence that the Tory government and Thatcher in particular can get away with all of the implications of their litany of every person for themselves and the devil take the hindmost, an attitude which gets very little opposition from the working class who in general hold the same anti-socialist views as the capitalist class and don't recognise that these are misconceptions that are in the interests of the capitalists not the workers.

Human nature or human behaviour?

The term nature when used in the context of describing a plant or animal organism can only mean the sum total of biological attributes which a particular organism possesses, so that when the word *nature* is used in conjunction with the word *chimpanzee* it refers to the sum total of physiological attributes which a chimpanzee has, and this applies not only to the individual chimpanzee but also to chimpanzees as a species. In like manner the term *human-nature* refers to the sum total of biological attributes which is general for the human species, the principal characteristics being upright stance, with bipedal locomotion, prehensile hands with opposable thumbs, stereoscopic binocular colour vision, audio and vocal tract anatomy and, most importantly, the relatively largest and most complex brain of any species of organism living or extinct. According to the available scientific evidence, this unique combination of biological attributes which in fact is the nature of the organism (or human-nature) has not changed significantly over the last 40,000-50,000 years and it enables the human species to condition to a large extent its own behaviour which, in contrast, has changed considerably during that period.

When an opponent of socialism says “What about human nature?”, the question that arises is: What is *human-nature* in contrast to *human behaviour*? One of the main principles of logic states that no logical discussion can take place, and therefore no logical conclusions be reached, without an agreed premise on both sides of a dialogue. In most cases there can be no dialogue with Social Darwinists, who apparently make no distinction between human-nature and human behaviour and say that human behaviour will only change when human-nature changes, but that this will never happen because, they claim, the nature of the human species has been fixed for all time. Hence the often re-iterated cliché, “you can't change human nature!” Needless to say that when they talk of human-nature they mean human behaviour . . .

Unfortunately, a large number of anthropologists and others in related disciplines use these terms in the same slipshod manner. It is therefore imperative that we use them in a precise way, and not just as a matter of semantic exactitude but so as to convey the real situation. What has to be taken special note of is the fact that the flexibility and adaptability of human behaviour is because of human biological nature and not in spite of it. We must also bear in mind that since the total biological inheritance of the organism is contained in the single-celled zygote (fertilized ovum) behaviour as such cannot be inherited.

So when a supporter of capitalism says “you can't change human nature”, the reply should be: “who wants to? Human nature is alright as it is!” Human nature as it is makes it possible to exist in all kinds of manifestations, not just support for capitalism but also the potentiality of the change from the behaviour of capitalism to that of socialism.

-The above is an edited version of a report of a Socialist Party committee set up in 1988 to investigate the possibility of producing a pamphlet on the subject of Human Nature.

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