



Lindsey German & Chris Harman

Interview of the Month: James Moore

The evolution revolution

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Darwin's theory of evolution was one of the great breakthroughs in materialist thought of the last century. A fascinating new biography puts Darwin in his social context. One of its authors, *James Moore*, talked to *Lindsey German* and *Chris Harman*.

What made you and Adrian Desmond write this book?

Adrian and I have known each other for years and admired each others' work both politically and

professionally. Adrian's a professional writer, I'm an academic.

I've been working on Darwin for about 20 years, off and on. I got into him from a religious angle, since I was brought up in middle America and Darwin represented everything in the modern world that my social circle opposed – the left, communism, the liberal establishment – everything from pornography and paedophilia to cosmic conspiracies. Darwin, you see, got humanity on the slippery slope of believing we are nothing but animals. I was interested in revising that view as I grew to intellectual maturity.

The main politicising influence for me was the Vietnam War, being threatened with the draft, becoming an outsider in Johnson's Great Society. I came to this country in 1972, during the Heath government, and one member of my family wrote to ask, 'What is it like living in a totalitarian socialist state?' This was because of the national health service, the nationalised railways and so on. I was quite starry eyed about Britain when I first arrived, but I feel a great deal more realistic now, although it's still a much more humane society in many respects than America.

I should add that my politicisation was out of a narrow evangelicalism – it is very difficult not to be evangelical growing up in middle America – and came about by pressing some of the radical implications of Christianity – about war and peace, poverty and race – which were not even on the agenda of my theological professors. I finished a degree in divinity before coming to do history in this country, and it was such failures to face the hard questions that drove me towards a more and more Marxist understanding. The result, for me, is that socialism is something easy to be evangelical about, in the sense that moral fervour is a transferable virtue – or sometimes vice.

I can't speak for Adrian, but I do know that the widespread deference to Darwin in our society put him off the subject. He avoided Darwin because, he joked, you needed to hate him first in order to understand him. So it was me who suggested writing about Darwin together.

What made you come to the most controversial thing in the book, certainly on the right, the idea that Darwin didn't publish his findings for so long because of the comfort he thought it would give to the most radical sections of society?

There have been lots of unsolved problems about Darwin. One is his notorious ill health. He was as sick as a dog for half his adult life. Another is that he delayed publication of his basic theory of evolution by natural selection for 20 years. Is there a common explanation? I always thought so. Ten years ago I wrote an essay which analysed the kind of life Darwin lived to see whether that type of life – a clerical naturalist's, in an old vicarage in the Kent countryside – might have something to do with the tensions he experienced as Britain lurched from crisis to crisis in the late 1830s and 40s. It was by expanding my insights on the basis of what Adrian had done in his brilliant book, **The Politics of Evolution**, that we came to see Darwin as the perfect bourgeois, petrified for his respectability.

Our view that Darwin's delay and his illness were both caused by his fears for the reception of his theory is less controversial on the right than among people who class

themselves as liberal and believe that there were strictly scientific reasons for Darwin's delay, and strictly medical reasons for his illness.

Leave it to the doctors, many would say, to explain Darwin's wretched vomiting and headaches; leave philosophers of science to show why he needed more and more facts to firm up his theory. In this view Darwin becomes the paradigm of the modern researcher, objective, detached, above the fray, searching scrupulously for evidence. Tragically, then, this great man suffered – perhaps from a genetic defect, perhaps from a disease caught on the *Beagle* voyage.

We say that people can interpret Darwin this way because they ignore the social and political history of his era.

There is a review of your book in the New Scientist – quite a favourable review – which says this approach is wrong. The reviewer says it would be rather like someone doing a biography of him which takes into account the Gulf War or the riots in Newcastle. We would argue that even if people aren't political as such, society and politics affects their lives. They cannot be hermetically sealed off from events around them.

By 1850 Darwin and his wife had a portfolio worth, in our money, over two million pounds. Now take a man of this class, who lived off his investments, and locate him in a society which is threatened by revolutionary change from below, in a world which – as you can see in the 1848 revolutions – is tearing itself apart. Of

course he is going to be worried. Why do you think Darwin toyed with the idea of emigrating to Australia? It was away from the economic uncertainty and turmoil of European politics. It all adds up when you see it from the social and political angle.

The early chapters of your book show how a whole section of the upper middle classes moved from quite a radical Enlightenment position, back to the Church of England. This then makes sense of the whole picture, of the way you describe Darwin doing biology to try to show the wonders of God's world at work, and the way he discovers things which undermine that. Even if you accept the claims of the New Scientist review that Darwin never mentioned Chartism, he must have been affected by the atmosphere of the period.

Sure. But there's a lot of things Darwin never mentioned. He never mentioned going to the loo, but we can be quite sure it was part of his existence. He didn't discuss about the Great Exhibition of 1851 either, but that and Chartism had an enormous impact on the public consciousness of Victorian Britain. Darwin would have had to be deaf and blind to miss them. As a rich man, he would have been a fool not to worry about Chartism. And he was no fool.

It's the historian's job to make the silences eloquent. We all do that all the time, otherwise we abandon any hope of narrative in history.

Darwin comes from a Whig background, he is very wealthy. His family are anti-slavery, for the Reform Bill and so on – but the growth of working class militancy pushes them away from radical change. The class divide overtakes the need for more democratic rights and they become more conservative.

The Wedgwood potteries, to which Darwin's own family – his mother was a Wedgwood – were deeply indebted, went through a crisis during the Napoleonic wars. As the shutters came down in reaction to the French Revolution, many of the old radical Unitarians veered towards the Church of England. Things went pretty bad economically, which makes sense of the reaction in a way. A good deal more religious control was needed. So the radicalism of Midlands Dissenters like Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus was rapidly eroded into a kind of middle-of-the-road Anglicanism with evangelical tinges. Charles's father, Dr Robert Darwin, a freethinker worth millions of pounds in our money, decided to send an aimless second son into the Church of England. It was altogether respectable, it did not take a great deal of religious conviction and one day young Charles was bound to have a fortune to live off.

Darwin thereafter participates in this reaction to the 1790s, he breathes its atmosphere at Cambridge. There were Whigs at Cambridge, standing for a little more middle-class democracy, and Darwin was that sort of person. It was a

terribly comfortable environment – but not a comfortable environment for anyone who believed species changed and humanity was related to apes. That was a brutalising doctrine, and blasphemous.

Darwin realised what that entailed when he came back to London from his trip on the *Beagle* in 1837 to see flaming democrats and republicans once again waving the red banner for social change and evolutionary progress. He had to swallow hard, keep secret notebooks and watch his step. He was a young man on the make, destined for respectability. The last thing he dared do was come out with his evolutionary speculations.

So there was a transition from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, followed by a crisis, in the 1840s with the railway mania and then the bust. What were people who thought they were going to be able to live off their investments going to do with their lives? What space was there in the world for those who wanted to make a living out of science? Some place had to be made for these ambitious young men. Not Darwin, he had money behind him, but, for example, Thomas Huxley. Where were men like him going to stand in the society of the Crystal Palace? When in 1859 Darwin eventually went public in the **Origin of Species**, his reputation, aspects of his theory and his enormous accumulation of evidence served as a battering ram for these young men to open up for themselves what became the professional middle class.

It is striking how little of what Darwin himself really believed to be scientifically true was taken up by Huxley. Darwin was always afraid he was being misunderstood by this angry young man, and in the end Huxley, Darwin's most famous advocate on either side of the Atlantic, never really did accept Darwin's theory of natural selection – the jury was still out on that one. But evolution itself, just like

radicals had said 50 years earlier, *was* true because social progress – progress for the scientists and their minions – depended on it. This wasn't a 'scientific revolution' – it was only a palace coup.

Most people are taught that Darwin discovered evolution and then, as a footnote, there were previous men like Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck. Most people think that until the late 1850s everyone believed the world was created according to Genesis. Your material on the radical evolutionists is fascinating, because it shows this stratum of people arguing for a scientific approach against the church, even if on a wrong foundation.

People have believed in the natural appearance of species without any kind of divine intervention for thousands of years. In the nineteenth century the main explanation before Darwin had been furnished by the French *philosophe* Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. He was a materialist, believing in an absentee god, and he might even have been an atheist. He represented all the things that middle-class and upper-class Anglicans opposed. Lamarck believed that life swept up from below, from spontaneously generated atoms of life right up to humanity. Nature was an escalator moving upward. And the way this happened was that animals acquired perfections in this life – bigger muscles by exercise, a larger brain or whatever – and

their offspring inherited them. This was automatic, it had to be. It held great promise for those who wanted to believe society was going to change irresistibly. As working men acquired knowledge, for example, they were going to cease to be working men and become something better. This was a self powered evolution, and was at loggerheads with the Anglican notion that all change came from above in society, that is from god ultimately through his ministers and priests. So Lamarck represented change from below, republicanism, the overthrow of divine monarchs and of divinity itself.

In the 1830s that kind of evolution was on the streets, in the gutter press. When Darwin first started speculating about evolution, he reached a point in one of his early notebooks where he wrote, 'Love of the deity is the effect of organisation.' In other words, our bodies actually produce our thoughts of god. He then reproaches himself, 'Oh you materialist!'

He soon devised a strategy in his notebooks for concealing the implications of his beliefs. A few months after he hit on his own mechanism for change. It wasn't Lamarck's self-powering, from below, inevitable progress. It was based on the Reverend Thomas Malthus's theory of population, which was the bulwark of the workhouses and a mainstay of Whig politics. This taught that there were always too many mouths to feed, not enough food to go around, and thus a struggle for existence was inevitable *unless* workers cut their wage demands and exercised sexual restraint. This fitted the intellectuals of the industrial bourgeoisie perfectly. They were Malthusians even before Darwin twigged that nature must work that way: progress comes through struggle, by

the law of population, not just for capitalist society, but for animals and plants too, which cannot exercise sexual restraint. But it wasn't inevitable progress. Things could regress, things could get worse too.

So Darwin was not promising as much as the radicals. His evolution was compatible with the belief that God had ordained it. Malthus himself was a parson after all. Yet in the 1840s Darwin knew that if he went public with this respectable middle-class version of how organic life changes, he would be tarred with the same brush as the extremists. He kept his head down, moved out of London into a country parsonage, and became hopelessly, anxiously ill.

There are problems in all this for the left, though. Traditionally we've worshipped at Darwin's shrine like everyone else. He's one of our saviours, he's delivered us from religion into scientific modernity. To show the class origins of a theory which we now accept might suggest there's nothing more to Darwin's theory than there was in the false French idea that life inherits its perfections.

We wouldn't accept that point. Firstly in some places it has taken a hundred years before Darwin's ideas were fully accepted, for instance in middle America. More significantly, hardly had the theory developed than there were all sorts of pressures on it, various misinterpretations – social Darwinism and so on.

We go beyond that in the book. We say that what Darwin believed about evolution started in an attempt to explain society. Darwin was casting around for a mechanism to explain life in general and he went to

what we would now call demography or sociology to find an explanation which fit the rest of the natural world. He didn't sort out how life changes and then apply it to people. His key came from the Malthusian theory of *human* population.

Darwin did not publish specifically on human evolution for 12 years after the **Origin of Species** came out. The **Origin** said precious little about humanity, it gave only a hint, and that was a deliberate strategy – which is more grist to the mill of our interpretation. Darwin wrote in 1866, seven years after the **Origin** that 'whenever' he published his book on human evolution, the **Descent of Man**, he would 'meet with universal disapprobation, if not execution'. He was still worried sick. Here's what the whole debate was about: are human beings merely a part of nature, subject to nature's forces, or does humanity in some sense, by work, collectively transcend the forces of nature and make their own history? Darwin didn't believe so. He saw what was going on in his world – 'savages' exterminated, Britain expanding, women in their place – as natural phenomena to be explained by science. He saw people as moulded by nature rather than society. Now we go beyond that.

Both Darwin and Freud are products of a certain kind of society. But they have incredible knowledge and insight into particular areas of life. In Freud's case his acceptance of certain features of bourgeois society then holds him back. The same with Darwin. It is not a question of saying, 'Does this make it hard for socialists to accept these kind of thinkers?' They are something you

can build on. It then takes a Marxist analysis to develop their ideas.

Just like Marx saw in Darwin ‘a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history.’ The **Critique of Political Economy** came out in 1859, the same year as the **Origin of Species**. Marx exploded political economy while using it against itself – showing how people make wealth under particular conditions. Darwin exploded the doctrine of a natural economy by using it against itself, namely Malthus against the Anglican creationists.

So both Marx and Darwin are arguing against a fixed, divine order of things. Struggle replaces natural harmony for them both. But when it comes to Marxising Darwin or Darwinising Marx I think there are real dangers precisely because of the tension between nature and history. Marx privileges history, Darwin privileges nature. Darwin explains our social development in terms of natural forces but I think we would want to talk about historical forces, about our own decisions and struggles. The future of humanity is too important to be left to the natural scientist, old or new.

Darwin by Adrian Desmond and James Moore is available in hardback price £20. A paperback edition will be out in the autumn.
