



Book Review

Darwinian Politics. The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom. By Paul H. Rubin.
New Brunswick, New Jersey, & London. Rutgers University Press. 2002. 240 pp. ISBN
0-8135-3096-2.

Reviewed by Jack Parsons

This book has caused me more work and heart-burn than the last half-dozen or so I have reviewed all put together. The reason for this, in essence, is that although it is the work of a senior scholar who has put together a great deal of interesting and wide-ranging material, throwing out some challenging notions as he goes – the outcome subsequently having been being commended in glowing terms by some heavyweight reviewers – it still seems to me seriously deficient in several ways, most notably in its treatment of one of its two stated themes, human freedom.

The latter is a subject very near to my own heart. I have written on it at some length¹; it provided my main motive in volunteering to review this work, and the treatment given to it here is the main reason for the strongly critical aspects of this review. I also have problems with the treatment of group size-effects, however, touched on here and there in various ways but without any attempt to confront systematically the many weighty issues inherently related to numbers and group-size, or to synthesize. The taboos on population control/optimisation are observed.

Author-details and structure of book

Paul H. Rubin is Professor of Econom-

ics & Law at Emory University, Editor-in Chief of *Managerial & Decision Economics*, fellow of the Public Choice Society, senior fellow of the Progress & Freedom Foundation, adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, & a former Vice-President of the Southern Economics Association. His many previous works include books covering such topics as managing business transactions, costing, communications, decision-making, and privacy.

This book has eight chapters, starting with 'Background: Evolution & Politics'. No. 2 is entitled 'Groups: Membership & Conflict', and it is followed by one on 'Altruism, Cooperation, & Sharing'. Nos. 4 and 5 cover 'Envy' and 'Political Power', respectively; while No. 6 is about 'Religion & the Regulation of Behavior'. Seven deals with 'How Humans make Political Decisions'; and the final one spells out the 'Relevance of the Pleistocene for Today'. There are four pages of chapter notes, 16 pages of references, and an eight-page combined Index, of which more anon.

Thesis

Professor Rubin starts his Preface with the words 'The notion that humans are born as blank slates (*tabula rasa*, ... etc) is no longer intellectually respectable ...'. He celebrates E.

O. Wilson's 'magisterial' contribution in this field, supports his conclusion that 'evolutionary biology will ultimately become the basis for the social sciences', and states:

I write this book in the same spirit. My purpose is to examine, from an evolutionary perspective, certain political behaviors and preferences common to humans. I am concerned in a broad sense with the menu of issues discussed in the political arena. I believe that this menu can be explained as resulting from our biological evolution. Some political issues have been relevant to humans even before they were human, and we have evolved certain behaviours and preferences or ways of looking at these questions ...

Political attitudes are heritable... selected through evolution... [but this] does not imply that there is a gene for each attitude... genes may establish general predispositions which many in turn shape environmental influences that may then influence attitudes. As in all behaviors, cause is both genetic and environmental ("nature" and "nurture"). My point is to analyse the nature part of this causation. (pp. ix-x)

The author likens his approach to that of Peter Singer in *A Darwinian Left* (2000), 'that there are evolved political preferences... and that political systems must consider, and perhaps adapt to, these preferences' (p. x). Although he, Rubin, tries to be: 'somewhat more analytical and allow the agenda to come from the preferences... rather than impose my [own] ... Indeed, in writing this book I have come to question some of my previously held beliefs' (p. x).

A key concept is the EEA, the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, in some respects older than the Pleistocene – about 1.6 million to 10,000 years BP – during which '... most of the behaviour that is of interest here, evolved ...'. He repeats over and over again,

sometimes on facing pages, (one of several aspects of the book which indicate that the manuscript would have benefited from sympathetic but firm editing) that during this period 'we evolved in groups of perhaps 25 to 150', whereas; 'Now we live in... agglomerations of up to one billion...', a remark taken up later in this review. He continues:

The social decision-making mechanisms are radically different today from those in earlier times. But the individual... [ones] we use are those that evolved with our ancestors, and many of the issues [today] ... are surprisingly similar t ... [those faced by them].

Sometimes in human history we have done quite a good job of adapting these evolved tendencies in ways that have led to governments that did a good job of satisfying human preferences. At other times, government institutions have been amazingly bad for their citizens and residents... I show how the constant set of evolved political preferences and behaviors can sometimes lead to good outcomes and sometimes to bad outcomes... [and I] provide some suggestions for improving our lives today, based on achieving our evolved goals. We can devise institutions that will do a better job of satisfying our evolved preferences.

I analyze political behaviors in several dimensions: group or social behavior, including ethnic and racial conflict; altruism and cooperation; envy; political power; and the role of religion in politics. I also analyze how we make political decisions. All human societies must deal with these issues – and they have – from the time humans came into being, and even before. As a result, we have evolved a set of preferences and behaviors with respect to these issues. These preferences and behaviors evolve with our humanness. If we understand the

ways in which they evolved, we will be in a better position to understand how we decide on these issues and perhaps how we should decide.

I reach a surprising conclusion: modern western nations, and particularly the United States, are the most effective societies for satisfying our evolved political preferences... [even though we] now live in societies of tens or hundreds of millions. Therefore it is not obvious that our current society would be good at satisfying our evolved preferences... [This] result is surprising, even remarkable (pp. x-xi).

Another surprise – at least to the present reviewer but possibly to African Americans, the Latinos, the WASPs and their critics, and still others – is his parenthetical assertion that:

(The main reason the United States is in a better position than even western European nations is that it does not have any dominant ethnic group, and so the risk of one group seizing the government and using it to impose undesirable predatory ethnic or racial policies is low) (p. xi).

Certain tendencies in political behavior are rooted in this evolutionary history. I hope to elucidate these tendencies in this book, which is an effort which E. O. Wilson has called consilience – the unification of knowledge across the sciences, the social sciences, and humanities. I believe that important parts of political behavior are rooted in our evolutionary heritage (p. xii).

However:

It would be completely improper to read my analysis as arguing that biology alone determines outcomes or that I argue for biological determinism (p. xiii).

In my view, in conclusions such as those now listed, the book displays a strong and surprisingly naive right-wing bias:

Policies, such as affirmative action, that stress ethnic group identity are dangerous because they can induce people to revert to earlier behavioural patterns (p. xiv).

People mostly become wealthy by being productive and creating benefits for others... therefore, desires to... penalise the wealthy are misguided (p. xiv).

Recent protests against globalisation are another manifestation of tribalism and lack of understanding of the benefits of exchange, which accrue to both sides in a voluntary transaction (p.190)

We in the United States can also gain from immigration... [We] ... could also allow more immigrants who could generate increased wealth for ourselves and for the immigrants. Increased immigration could also solve any problems with our Social Security System (p.190).

Of course there is no law against being right-wing and of course there is something to be said for all of the above opinions, but, equally, there are cogent points to be made against them. Many analysts have reservations about aspects of affirmative action, immigration control, etc, but simply ignoring the weight of the arguments in the other scale-pan and stating the above propositions as self-evident truths surely cannot be justified.

Taking just one example, immigration. It is said that the US already takes in more immigrants than all other countries put together. Immigration is the largest component of the rapid growth of the US population and virtually all public-opinion polls within this sphere show considerable concern about increasing population-pressure on resources and resounding majorities in favour of very much tighter immigration controls. Why are these

largely ignored by the elite?

What is the alleged justification for this continued riding roughshod over the will of the electorate? What are the longer-term political, social, and ethical consequences of negating the democratic process? What are the likely ecological and other consequences of continually increasing population pressure on the American environment, especially on the scarce freshwater supplies which are already causing serious problems, notably in Arizona and neighbouring states.

These have recently lead to unique legislative developments on the regulation of water-use, partly because of: 'California's unquenchable thirst [stemming largely from its exploding immigrant population?] against that of its smaller but equally parched neighbours' (Murphy, *New York Times*, 5 Jan., 2003).

Even if Professor Rubin's case is granted in its entirety, there are still very important knock-on effects which surely must not be simply ignored. Many distinguished US scholars – such as Garrett Hardin and David Pimentel – believe that their country is already seriously overpopulated, its longer-term sustainable carrying capacity with a reasonable quality of life being very much smaller than that already reached. Hardin's figure is as low as 50 million.

Considerations of this order of magnitude must not be brushed aside. Anyone conscientiously arriving at contrary conclusions ought to dovetail them – or at least make the effort – into what they believe are their own weightier countervailing facts and arguments.

The book's treatment of freedom

It is this topic that has given me by far the most work and worry, despite the fact that there is very little matter on the subject in the whole book. In fact, this is a big part of the problem. No chapter is devoted to it, as we have seen. The author's summary on this sub-theme covers only two-thirds of a page, and there are only four entries under 'freedom' in the Index (though – without making a purposeful search – I spotted and listed six more).

In view of the alleged primacy of his focus on the biological basis underlying the present state of human freedom, Professor Rubin might have done well to start with animal liberty as expressed, for example, by Pavlov on the 'freedom-reflex', which 'in some animals ... is so strong that when placed in captivity they reject food, pine away, and die' (Koshtoyants, Kh. S., 1955. *IP Pavlov, Selected Works*. p. 184). There are a several brief sections on territorial and related behaviour in chimps, which imply considerations of liberty, but that is all.

The basis of his position seems to be an unshakeable conviction that human control and liberty are polar opposites, inversely related, the more there is of one, the less there must be of the other. On the last page of his Preface, he admits with disarming frankness that;

When I began this research I was a libertarian and did not understand government regulation of private behavior, such as regulation of drugs or pornography. Based on the reasoning in Chapter 6, on the role of religion in human behavior, I now at least understand some social benefits for such regulation.

Thus, the analysis has led to the conclusions; I have not used evolutionary analysis to prove points in which I already believed. (p. xv)

The present reviewer finds himself totally bemused by the questions which these remarks must raise; how can anyone professing expertise in any of the social sciences: (a) ever have entertained such a belief? and/or, (b) be so innocent as to openly admit it?

These admissions appear to display not only a total lack of grasp of the basic social control and countercontrol processes, but a black hole of almost cosmic proportions in either knowledge of – or at least acceptance of – the vast body of literature going back to the founders of civilisation.

David Hume's comment on the ancient

Greeks seems very apposite here: 'These people were extremely fond of liberty; but seem not to have understood it very well.' (*Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations*)

Fortunately, some Greeks did understand it, a few very well indeed.

After having set down in his *Politics* the immortal passage: 'A man who cannot live in society, or who has no need to do so because he is self-sufficient, is either a beast or a god; he is no part of a state' (Warrington, 1959, p.8). Aristotle went on to say: 'In extreme democracies ... everyone lives as he pleases... But this is an altogether unsatisfactory conception of liberty. It is quite wrong to imagine that life subject to constitutional control is mere slavery; it is in fact salvation' (Op cit., p.156).

In the first century BCE, Cicero declared: 'We are the law's slaves, that we might be free', and many of the great philosophers since Aristotle have been in no doubt on this score.

John Locke, for instance: 'The end of the law is not to abolish or restrain but to preserve and enlarge freedom: for in all states of created beings capable of laws: where there is no law there is no freedom (1690. *Second Treatise of Civil Government*. Bk.2. Ch. 6, para. 7).

In *The Social Contract*, Jean Jacques Rousseau made this point over again, while Montesquieu stressed the widespread lack of understanding of liberty and the related social and political processes: 'There is no word that admits of more varied meanings and has made more different impressions on the human mind' (Quoted Inge, 1949, p. 149).

Spinoza believed that 'The free man ... is one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone' (Part IV, Proposition LXVII, *Ethics*) while Immanuel Kant wrote in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that Freedom is '... independence of anything other than the moral law alone.'

Tom Paine was convinced that: 'Liberty, properly understood, ... consist in the power of doing whatever does not injure another' (1791-2 *The Rights of Man*. *Everyman*

edn. 1950. p. 95).

Surely one of the greatest of them all in this sphere is John Stuart Mill. It is hard for any social-science treatment of the subject which ignores his teachings to command respect. 'As soon as any part of a person's conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it, and the question of whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it becomes open to discussion...' (1859. *Utilitarianism, Liberty & Representative Government*. *Everyman's Edition*, 1948. p.132).

Modern sociologists appear to be unanimous on the theme clearly set forth by the ancients, that liberty and control are not opposed to each other but are inseparable aspects of the overall goal-seeking, social control process. Herbert Spencer supported this theme and the American pioneer sociologist, C. H. Cooley, probably put it more bluntly than any other theorist: 'It is freedom to be disciplined in as rational a manner as you are fit for' (1964. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. p.426).

Durkheim spelt out the theme in minute detail. In essence: 'Liberty (we mean genuine liberty, which it is society's duty to have respected) is itself the product of regulation. I can only be free to the extent that others are forbidden to profit from their physical, economic, or other superiority to the detriment of my liberty' (1964 *edn.*, *The Division of Labour in Society*. pp. 2-3).

Attention was drawn by the modern English philosopher, Maurice Cranston, to another important aspect of freedom not dealt with by Rubin. He argued that for most of us the idea of liberty has two quite different *kinds* of meanings, one descriptive – that which we would normally understand by the term, you can do/have 'a' and 'b', e.g., but not 'y' and 'z' – and the other the emotive, the widely differing overtones/affective meanings the concept tends to carry: 'While the descriptive meaning of 'freedom' ... varies, the emotive meaning tends ... to be constant' (1953. *Freedom. A New*

Analysis, p. 21).

This formulation highlights a wide range of possible misunderstandings, contradictions, and dissatisfactions within the control-freedom process.

Literary commentary on control and freedom

In addition to the great philosophers, many of our literary giants have also emphasized the relationship between liberty, responsibility, and society. Shakespeare, for instance, wrote; ‘Head-strong liberty is lashed with woe!’ (*Comedy of Errors*, Act II, Sc. I). In *To Althea, From Prison*, Richard Lovelace drew attention to the objective-subjective dichotomy regarding liberty: ‘Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage ... etc’, a theme later taken up and given a quasi-mathematical formulation by the sociological master, Pitirim Sorokin (1957. *Social & Cultural Dynamics*, p. 488).

In *Sonnet XII*, Milton, wrote: ‘Licence they mean, when they cry “Liberty”, for who loves that must first be good and wise’, and – in *Letters From the Underworld* – Dostoevsky concurred: ‘Man is likely to prefer to be free rather than to be reasonable’.

Reviewer’s summary on the topic of freedom

Professor Rubin seems to take it very much for granted that what is urgently needed is more and more liberty for everyone. We must get the government off our backs.

In his brief summary on freedom (p.133), he states firmly: ‘There are substantial benefits form (*sic*, presumably ‘from’) limiting government power and great dangers from allowing it to increase. It is, therefore, a puzzle to explain why so many seek to increase the power of government’ (p.134).

Surely this, again, is naive. As he readily admits, most ordinary people want governments to do quite a lot more to protect them against unscrupulous traders, banks, and other financial institutions; from tobacco companies heroically lying for decades about the lethal properties of their wares, the monopolies and protection-rackets of power-suppliers, pollu-

tion-spreaders, makers of dangerous automobiles, etc. After the ENRON debacle demonstrated how widespread, deep and devious the corruption and collusion can be in top financial institutions – including those supposed to be giving impartial advice and monitoring the system to ensure that minimal standards are maintained -- very few everyday citizens will have found it much of a ‘puzzle’ as they observed the swelling and surely legitimate demand for much tighter government controls.

By the same token the world’s poor, small countries, and those with weak economies seek international ‘government’ – some sort of rule-book and sanctions – to reduce their exploitation by the multinationals – some of which have an annual turnover larger than the total budgets of a number of countries – and the institutions of the rich in general.

As the celebrated scholar, R. H. Tawney, dryly pointed out: ‘Freedom for the pike is death for the minnow.’

Dostoevsky also raised the fundamental questions -- later given extensive treatment by the existentialists – how much freedom do most humans actually desire, and how much can they cope with? In *The Brothers Karamazov*, he has his Grand Inquisitor declaim: ‘Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom’.

Erich Fromm later wrote an influential book entirely devoted to this theme, *The Fear of Freedom*, first published in 1942, and in this context the question of anomie (a pathological excess of freedom?) must at least be touched on, as well as the widespread human addiction to freedom-negating dogmatic belief-systems, charismatic or otherwise powerful leaders, outright dictators, and omnipotent gods.

Numbers and freedom

While this author frequently mentions numbers – stressing over and over again the surmised small size of groups in the EEA – it seems to me that he nowhere deals with them systematically. He doesn’t seem to take them seriously, not even raising the really basic ques-

tion whether or not there is or may be a relationship between this variable and freedom, or between group-size and democracy. In his Preface he says that during the EEA ‘we evolved in groups of perhaps 25 to 150’, whereas; ‘Now we live in ... agglomerations of up to one billion... as in China and India.’

This seems to indicate a very casual approach to numbers. By 2001 -- when, presumably, the manuscript was handed over -- China had already been a demographic billionaire for a generation. By the middle of this year (2003), China is likely to be close to 1.3 billion. The population of India (at 1,033m), was also well over the billion mark, and the adoption of a margin of approximation appreciably larger than the present population of North America seems to indicate a somewhat cavalier approach to quantification. He gives the strong impression that, say, a ten million-fold increase the scale of individual societies from the EEA to the present is just a simple statistical fact to be noted in passing. ‘25 to 150’ is one sort of number; a billion is just one more number.

I am rusty on this aspect of the topic and cannot provide a reference, but I remember reading many years ago about an interesting classification of human group-sizes, relating these, in turn, to key qualitative aspects. The smallest was the ‘face-to-face’ group, in which all members knew each other well: the second, as I recall, the ‘mutual knowledge’ group, in which – as the name suggests – members all knew each other, but less intimately.

The next size up was the ‘mutual recognition’ group, now much larger, in which the majority did not know most of the other individuals except in the sense that they could all identify each other at least as members of the group. I forget the name of the next size up but it may have been something like ‘large group’, or, ‘mass-society’, in which – except for their own small personal circle – the vast majority have no idea who does or does not belong, or anything else very significant about them.

The American pioneers of management

studies (notably Chester Barnard) looked into these questions in detail and showed that group-sizes are very significant, leading to highly significant qualitative differences. They stressed the obvious fact (obvious when we are prompted to think about it?) that as the size of a group increases arithmetically, so its complexity tends to increase geometrically, a fact potentially leading in turn to ever-greater problems in coordination and management, if these tasks need to be discharged.

However, there is a problem with this. Simmel argued that as the size of a group increases the common features which ‘fuse its members into a social unit’ shrink in number, so that, paradoxically, a large group can be held together with a small number of norms more easily than a small group. (Always provided those norms can be enforced, of course). On the other hand, the larger the group, then, usually: ‘the more ... restrictive the kinds of conduct ... it must demand of its participants in order to maintain itself ... The center is left only with a prohibitive function ... with the restriction of liberty rather than its direction’ (Wolff, 1964, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. pp. 397-8).

Garret Hardin (a man I like to think of privately as the Buddha of Ecology) has pondered deeply on the relationship between group size and democracy, as is his wont, and decided that the latter ‘depends on efficient communication among its members’.

Out of this process emerged the resounding conclusion that this is: ‘the one supremely important function that suffers from diseconomies of scale throughout its entire range ... The problem of misunderstandings ... goes up as the square of ... population. Since misunderstandings generate disorder, we can say that the probability of disorder is proportional to the square of the population. (1988, ‘Cassandra’s Role in the Population Wrangle’ Ch. in Ehrlich & Holdren (eds.) *The Cassandra Conference ... etc.* pp. 12-13).

Professor Rubin’s treatment of society and freedom seems to deliberately eschew the

standard ‘control’ concepts and terminology of sociology. He speaks of power, control, and submission in individuals in terms of ‘dominants’ and ‘counter-dominants’, or ‘subordinates’ rather than using the standard concepts, ‘social-control’ and ‘countercontrol’. There is no discussion of socialisation, norms, the introjection of values, or the definition and teaching of roles, of ‘compliant’, ‘variant’ and ‘deviant’ behaviour, of sanctions, rewards and punishments, or – in some circumstances – of the positive functions of appropriate kinds and amounts of social conflict.

It would be extremely unreasonable of a reviewer to claim that any respectable work on freedom had to include all the themes and authorities which and who seem to her/him the most important. However, and by the same token, it does seem reasonable to be critical about a book which excludes practically all the works of practically all of the recognised authorities. The historical giants who *are* included, Hobbes and Locke, get rather short shrift. The first of these gets only five widely separated lines and only one mention in the Index, while Locke’s *tabula rasa* is briefly mentioned. Admittedly, modern writers such as Rawls and Nozick get a little more space, but another writer of substance, Hayek, receives only one three-line reference. Other outstanding writers on freedom not mentioned here include Max Weber, Simmel, and Isaiah Berlin.

What is needed here is not the maximisation of individual liberty, but – as in the case of so many other human variables – its *optimisation* in and for any given set of circumstances. This, in turn, calls not for a reduction of the machinery of social control to the irreducible minimum uncritically demanded by Professor Rubin, but, once again, for its *optimisation*.

This review is already very long, and in concentrating on the theme of numbers, control, and freedom, I have said – apart from expressing in the author’s own words his aims for the book – little about the rest of the text. I must

repair this to some degree by saying that there is a great deal of condensed material, a vast range of quotations and references to pretty well all of the known authorities – and many others – in the sphere of evolutionary psychology. I feel that if I launch into this I shall be constrained to write another book about this book so that I must needs desist, merely saying that there it contains a lot of interesting material, it is a valuable source-book, and it is well worth at least a serious browse. I was constrained to read my own copy from beginning to end and it is now covered in annotations.

For the possible benefit of anyone who thinks that this review obviously is – or even that it may be unfair, inadequate, biased, whatever, I commend – as a powerful antidote – the one by William A Spriggs, dated October 27, 2002, which can be found at Amazon, or on the *Evolution’s Voyage* web site at <http://evoyage.com/Book%20Reviews/DarwinianPolitics.htm>.

To round off I feel I must add a strong criticism of the Index to this book. In my view this falls a long way short – a common weakness even in scholarly works – of what is required in a book of this kind, one crammed with ideas, facts, and references. Many of the top publishers spoil their literary ships for the proverbial ‘ha-porth of tar’.

In this particular case there are no entries at all for a number of key concepts treated in the text; notably: aggression, banishment, cohesion, competition (for which I found 16 occurrences), cooperation, diseconomies of scale, dominance (reverse), externalities, fertility, feminism, group-cohesion, group size, homogeneity, honesty, immigration, liberty, Malthusian, migration, numbers, optimum (size/other variable), ostracism, overpopulation, population, power, pronatalism, quality, quantity, resources, selfishness, size, social control, social pressure, threshold-level, tipping-point, and tribalism.

Under ‘group’, there is a sub-category, ‘increase in size of’, with six entries, but with

regard to 'group size', a really key variable in this context, there is no entry, as noted above, despite the fact that only a rough check produces at least 31 occurrences of material on group-size which really ought to have been listed to guide the reader. A good index is a great boon and its absence implies a large black mark.

Notes

1. See Parsons, J. *Population Versus Liberty*. (1971) Hardback. London. Pemberton Books, & (1973) Paperback. Buffalo. NY. Prometheus Books. Hardback still in print with Population Policy Press. Llantrisant. Wales.

The *raison d'être* for this book was an attempt to resolve the problem of reconciling the already manifest need for population control with the equally imperative need to preserve individual liberty as far as possible.

The answers which finally emerged were that:

(a) Population changes themselves powerfully affect our liberties (NB. plural), in some

ways enhancing or increasing them, or both, in others ways, and in parallel, debasing or decreasing them, or both, facts which are more or less universally ignored.

(b) That many basic aspects of individual liberties (after Locke, & others, as above), are actually produced by social controls so that in any given eco-context the sum total of our liberty is maximised not by the minimisation of social control, but by its optimisation. Not too many, not too few, not too onerous, not too lax, but just right in both amount and kind for the time, the place, and the goals of the particular system.

(c) The overall outcome was that population control of one sort or another is essential in all societies at all times, not in despite of the need to preserve and enhance individual liberty, where this is valued, but *in order to preserve it*.

Jack Parsons, Former Deputy Director, Sir David Owen Population Centre, Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom. Email: jackparsons@beeb.net.