

## **Sing, Prance, Ruffle, Bellow, Bristle and Ooze**

by Armand Marie Leroi

A review of

*The Social Animal* by Walter G. Runciman, HarperCollins, £14.99, 230pp., February, 1998, 0-00-255862-9, and

*The Handicap Principle* by Amotz and Avishag Zahavi  
Oxford University Press, £18.99, 286pp, 1997, 0-19-510035-2

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At the London School of Economics a curious and almost foolishly brave intellectual venture is afoot, and has been for some 3 years now. In this votive temple to the various gods of economic and social thought, there is a seminar series, or rather a salon, devoted to all things Darwinian. These seminars (snappily titled "Darwin@LSE") delight or irritate according to taste, but always invigorate, and never more so than one evening this February when W. G. Runciman urged the necessity of refounding sociology along Darwinian lines. Weary of such pronouncements as they might be, even the most sceptical sociologists in the audience could not have failed to realise that here was a serious challenge to theoretical orthodoxy. For the speaker was no renegade entomologist, but rather the author of *A Treatise of Social Theory* (3 vols., 1983-97), arguably the most deeply considered and formidably studied exposition of historical sociology in recent times one, moreover, that rests entirely upon a Darwinian view of society. But as Runciman, the most engaging and courtly of men, argued his case with wit, clarity and the utmost intellectual candour, I found myself with engaged with a nagging question. To wit: who was Runciman's tailor?

For the distinguished sociologist was not dressed as other academics are. Among the dowdy sparrows of the LSE's intellectuals, he was a veritable peacock -- but, no -- for a peacock suggests something far too flashy; perhaps the sheen of a starling or the symmetry of swift would better convey the faultless lines of his suit, the soft heft of the fabric (visible at 40 feet), the dove grey shirt, the soberly elegant tie and all of it without stain or crease, suggesting another dozen of each in a walk-in closet at home. Quietly and unmistakably, that suit spoke of money and influence in the world of things.

Why did he wear it? Well, because Runciman had evidently come to the LSE directly from his day job which is Chairman of a shipping multinational as well other important things in the City, and suits of such understated perfection are the necessary uniform of such men. But still, why? Why are such suits necessary at all? The answer to this question and most others which impinge upon the display of luxury goods was answered in 1890 by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. And Veblen had something to say about men's dress as he did about virtually all human artefacts.

Much of the charm that invests the patent leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat, and the walking stick, which so greatly enhances the native dignity of a gentleman, comes of their pointedly suggesting that the wearer cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use.

Beautiful clothes are signals of prestige precisely because they are so expensive and so useless; they are the most obvious form of what Veblen called conspicuous waste. Of course, captains of industry had not, in Veblen's day, come to occupy the highest pinnacles of prestige; economic and political power lay with the landed aristocracy and, so too, in Veblen's inimitable prose, "the canon of pecuniary taste". And though the modern Chairman of the Board is certainly employed in matters of human use, the principle remains the same. By the perfection of his linen shall you know him from the serried ranks of rumpled drudges at the corporation's keyboards. Yet it is not my intention here to pillory the businessman's taste in attire, much less W. G. Runciman's, for, as Veblen shows at exhaustive length, conspicuous waste forms part of almost any human aesthetic decision; it is almost, but not quite, the whole of beauty itself. Preference for the handmade object over the manufactured one, the unusual over the common, the authentic over the fake and the impractical over the utilitarian are all just forms of conspicuous waste, be that preference however small. A life without conspicuous waste is hardly one that can be led, and certainly one not worth leading. The curious thing is that animals think so too.

Take stotting. A troop of gazelles which has just detected the presence of a predator might be expected to slink quietly off into the undergrowth, or perhaps bound gracefully in the opposite direction. Not a bit of it. Instead the antelopes bark, thump the ground with their little hooves and they stot: jump up and down while displaying their white rumps and whirling black tails to their aggressor. Only when the predator begins its strike do the gazelles pick up and run. This is the sort of thing that Amotz and Avishag Zahavi, two biologists from Tel-Aviv University, call a "handicap": a behaviour or structure which seemingly defies Darwinian rationality. A stotting gazelle wastes energy that might surely be better used in flight; it also draws attention to itself precisely when discretion would seem to be the better part of valour. Such handicaps, moreover, are apparently ubiquitous when one creature attempts to convey information to another. The dawn chorus of bird song may enchant or irritate at 4:00 am but, if the latter, spare a thought for the singers who are exhausting themselves in the effort. As is the kudu which must wield its enormous horns, the lyre-bird which must drag its fantastic tail, and the Great Bustard which must leap in its elaborate dance in order to entice a mate or deter a rival; everywhere, when animals signal they are seemingly lavish with time, energy and risk of death. Indeed, say the Zahavis, that is the whole point. When animals (and plants and fungi) sing, prance, ruffle, bellow, bristle or ooze, they are advertising their own superb Darwinian fitness to the world at large, enticing those who desire to mate, deterring those who seek to subjugate, and dissuading those who simply see them as food. When stotting, the insouciant gazelle signals to the predator that it has vigour to spare, and will almost certainly elude an attempted strike; far better the canny predator should try another antelope that is stotting with less conviction or not at all. It's all pure Veblen. The elaborate signals displayed by so many creatures are

conspicuous waste, the biological analogue of any luxury good: useless, even harmful, but indispensable as a guide to money in the bank.

The Zahavis are not the first to see meaning in animal signals, but no one else has seen as much meaning as they, and no-one has claimed with such conviction to understand that meaning. In the handicap principal they have found a interpretative tool that reveals the significance of the most obscure phenomena. Even the humble baker's yeast, when choosing a mate, is credited with subtle discriminatory powers of a type that one would not normally expect in a fungus. The revolutionary import of the Zahavian view of the world is well illustrated by their discussion of that touchstone for evolutionary biologists, the peacock's tail. For the Zahavis, each feature of the peacock's courtship display: the shimmering colours of the tail, the posture in which it is held, the way it is shaken, the roaring and stamping that accompany the display, are all there to proclaim male vitality, for it is only the healthiest birds that can display a perfect tail and bear the costs of doing so. Even the eyespots on the tail are claimed to be uniquely suited to advertising male quality, for they will show imperfections to a degree that simpler geometries such as lines would not. All this is quite different from Darwin's view. In the *Descent of man and selection in relation to sex* (1871) he argued that the peacock's tail, like all aesthetic traits, was essentially arbitrary in form. Females, perhaps because of some cognitive quirk, tended to favour males with certain attributes, say, a slightly more elaborate tail. Male tails and female choice would then evolve in tandem, mutually reinforcing each other, by a process that Darwin's successors called "runaway sexual selection." If the peacock's tail speaks of anything, it speaks only of the peculiarities of female psychology, a love of beauty for beauty's sake, and nothing of male quality. Indeed, it is just as likely that sexual selection would sometimes result in the evolution of very small tails.

Who is right? It is difficult to know. *The Handicap Principal* is a work of advocacy rather than a judicious review of the evidence. The problem is that discriminating between different evolutionary explanations for animal communication requires careful measurement of the costs and benefits to both those who are broadcasting the signal and those who are listening, and such measurements are difficult to make. Yet there is no denying it: the Zahavian view of the world is a compelling one; it draws our attention to things that we would not expect to otherwise find in animals. That generosity can have earthly rewards is a commonplace. Veblen explained dissipation among journeyman printers in 19thC America as a consequence of their "treating" each other to endless rounds of drinks in order to gain prestige. More unexpected is that the babbler, a small bird that lives in hierarchical groups, does much the same thing. Members of a group vie for the right to feed nestlings, undertake guard duty, and even attack snakes. None is more avid in the performance of these duties than the dominant bird; were it not, it would lose face and be at risk of a coup d'état. By now the point should be clear: the similarity between Veblen's idea of "conspicuous waste" and the Zahavis' "handicap principal" is a remarkable convergence between sociological and evolutionary theory. Even more remarkable, is that for once, just for once, the sociologists got there first.

It is a convergence of ideas that also illustrates perfectly the thesis of W. G. Runciman's new book, *The Social Animal*, one that can be stated very simply as follows:

First, sociology is a science; second, it is an evolutionary science. How you take these innocent sounding assertions (which put Runciman's case a little more bluntly than he does, but not by much) will depend on who you are. If you are among the many theoretical sociologists possessed of a visceral distaste for "positivist sociology," then the brisk common sense of this little book will have no appeal for you. But if you are, as I am, a natural scientist who has despaired, as I have, of finding a sociologist whose thought is deeply infused with that elusive yet utterly unmistakable quality sometimes called (though not by scientists who don't talk about such things) *the scientific temper* then you will, as I do, read this book with a sense of blessed relief. Here, you will say, is a sociologist I can do business with.

By "the scientific temper", I mean merely taking the methods which natural scientists have used to such good effect to understand the natural world for granted, and in this case, taking for granted as well that they can be applied to the study of human societies. To those not steeped in the sociological tradition, this may seem unproblematic. After all, the statistical devices that one might use to study conflict and coercion within, say, the British Labour Party can, in large part, be applied with equal facility to a colony of naked mole rats. But many sociologists see it differently. Backbenchers, they might say, are self-conscious in a way that mole rats are not, are capable of explaining their own actions as the rats are necessarily mute. But so what? Runciman: "The !Kung San of the Kalahari are as aware as the professors and graduate students who study them of the function of meat-sharing in reinforcing their social ties. But the function would be the same even if they weren't." Ah, replies the sociologist, but humans are also *reflexive*, that is, they can respond to what others say or do -- most especially, and perniciously, sociologists! But again, this makes the study of human society no more difficult than that of many natural systems in which the behaviour of an entity (atom, molecule, cell, tissue, one of the aforementioned mole rats) depends upon what others like it do. Nothing, after all, is more reflexive than the way we earn, save, and spend our money, yet this doesn't seem to fuss economists who accommodate such behaviour quite comfortably within systems of differential equations. No, the problem seems to be that for reasons peculiar to the history of their discipline many sociologists simply have a rather provincial view of natural science, an activity they take to be the search for "general laws." But, of course, it is not. General laws are, without a doubt, nice if you can find them, but really the business of scientists is to explain the particular object as well as the universal phenomenon; understand things true for one moment in history, and things true for all time; supply facts that brook no disputing, and disputes for which there are (as yet) no facts. A grab-bag of activities to be sure, but somehow all of it science. Which is why I have spoken of possessing the "scientific temper" rather than following the "scientific method". The methodological relativist may ask: what, then, isn't science? The answer to that is plain: most intellectual goods aren't science, and among these, occupying vast amounts of shelving in the supermarket of the mind, are the goods flogged by the Merchants of Attitude and Platitude.

Attitude Merchants are, in Runciman's words, "those [sociologists] who allow their personal views about the behaviour they are studying to inform their conclusions about it to the point that they neglect or devalue uncomfortable evidence for the sake of those views." They are legion in sociology, but Runciman singles out the current President of the International Sociological Association, Immanuel Wallerstein, as an

AM *par excellence*, Wallerstein having devoted his life to understanding the relative wealth of nations even as he “*hates* capitalism...like a Sunni Muslim hates a Shiite Muslim, or a Freemason a Jesuit, or a Rangers supporter a Celtic one.” That wouldn’t matter, except that this hatred has, Runciman claims, blinded Wallerstein to facts which do not fit his Neo-Marxist theory of trans-national economic exploitation. But it is the Platitude Merchants who have, if anything, been the true plague of 20th C Sociology: “those [sociologists] who allow their conviction of the importance of some general truths about human behaviour to convince them that by rephrasing those truths in more impressive-sounding words -- or, sometimes, more impressive-looking but nonetheless trivial mathematical equations -- they are advancing sociological knowledge.” Here Runciman picks on Talcott Parsons and so echoes C. Wright Mills’ memorable skewering of the Harvard sociologist’s mock profundities. But he might just as well have picked a fresher target, Jürgen Habermas, say. Still, this echo of Mills surely hints that Runciman intends *The Social Animal* to do what Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* did nearly 40 years ago: capture the hearts and minds of generations of sociologists yet unborn, or at least without their PhDs.

He intends to capture them for Darwin. He will, I think, succeed, and for very simple reason: the minimal requirements for Darwinian evolution are so few and are found everywhere. Consider a group of “things”. If these “things” vary in some way, reproduce more or less faithfully, and if some variant “things” reproduce more than others, then the “things” will evolve. It’s that simple. Now, if these “things” are DNA molecules, genes, then we are in the familiar world of biological evolution. But these “things” can be ideas as well -- love for one’s country; the refrain of *Mandalay*; the infallible means for defeating Athlete’s Foot -- all of them reproduce when passed from one person to another. This much has been clear for years; Richard Dawkins called such reproducing ideas “memes” in 1976. Runciman’s insight has been to see that such Darwinian “things” can also be all that occurs whenever someone finds himself not alone; his genius has been to pursue that insight until he arrives at a view of society as grand as that which Darwin first saw of life.

What occurs are “social practises” defined by Runciman as “reciprocal behaviour[s] informed by mutual recognition of shared intentions and beliefs.” A nice example is the system of infantry drill invented by Maurits of Nassau, *Stadholder* of Holland and Zeeland from 1585. This drill was a *reciprocal* behaviour in that officers commanded and soldiers obeyed, and all understood what was wanted: marching and countermarching in lockstep to the rattle of battledrums. It was hugely effective and, with a series of other military innovations, brought the young Maurits repeated triumphs against the Spanish in the 1590’s. The innovations caught on and spread rapidly across European armies, displacing other ways of ordering soldiers in battle. In other words, the social practise of war evolved. If the argument seems obvious, that’s because Runciman has just formalised the way which we think about such things anyway. It’s not merely a cynical metaphor: society really *is* a Darwinian soup, but social practises, not ourselves, are in the swim.

But, still, what really *drives* social evolution? The answer to this rests on three other questions. First, what is the origin of novel social practises? Second, how are they transmitted among their “carriers” (commonly known as people)? Third, what is the

selective agent, or, why is one social practise chosen over another? Runciman is coy about the answers to all these questions but, I think, rightly so for social practises are so diverse that they cannot be easily summarised by the kinds of simple rules that genetics gives to biological evolution, and the charm of his theory is its very generality. The variation in social practises that is the stuff of evolution may arise as the conscious inventions of Great Men with furrowed brows, or unthinking behavioural changes in countless anonymous souls. Such variants may be entirely new or may be combinations of existing social practises; the analogy is with genetic mutation and recombination respectively. The transmission of social practises, the analogue of Mendelian inheritance, is equally diverse. Some social practises may be transmitted from parent to child, others may be disseminated by the *LRB*. An especially interesting feature of social practises, one not shared by genes, is that their transmission can be influenced by inequalities in power. That is, in a hierarchical society, some people (employers, officers, politicians, bureaucrats) can make us adopt social practises against our will, and others can influence us in more subtle ways. To the degree that we, the inhabitants of liberal democracies, are, as Tocqueville said, but “one hundredth part Masters and wholly Slaves” there is no more potent force behind social evolution than this, even more so in despotic societies. Still, this leaves open the question, when we are free to choose among social practises, what do we care about? Again, Runciman answers, it is power -- economic, ideological, coercive or any combination of them. I am not sure that it is *always* the quest for power that causes us to favour one social practise over another. Sociobiologists, who are keen on subjects such as polygamy, homicide, and incest, might argue that certain social practises, like genes, are favoured for their influence upon reproductive success; economists, on the other hand, see people as maximising “utility”. But it really doesn’t matter: the logic of social selection is the same, and reproductive success, utility, and the various forms of power are closely related; which is fore or hindmost in our minds when we decide what to do, is a question for psychologists, and a very interesting one too.

As Darwin was by no means original in viewing life’s teeming diversity as the outcome of descent by modification, so too, there are social evolutionists by the score behind Runciman. But, as Darwin’s originality lay in providing a mechanism for evolution and exploring its consequences, so too, does Runciman’s. One such consequence is that there is no place in Runciman’s account for the idea, so dear to Comte, Spencer, and Marx (to name but three), that social evolution necessarily proceeds in a particular direction, through particular stages, perhaps even to greater moral heights. Quite possibly societies do evolve as stage theorists say they do, but that is matter of contingent history and does not stem from the logic of the selective process itself. As for the moral worth of one society or social practise over another, “that,” as Runciman puts it, “is up to you.” All this serves to damp the powder of Runciman’s potential opponents, none more than that of the current Director of the LSE, Anthony Giddens, who has long insisted that there is no place in sociology for the concept of evolution, nor even in *Sociology*, his best-selling textbook (3rd Ed, 1997). This, Runciman remarks, “...is as sensible as insisting that there is no place in physical theory for the concept of gravity,” and, after reading *The Social Animal*, one can but agree. Indeed, it is easy to see how the social scientist who seeks to understand the causes of *any* social phenomenon, be it group fission in the Yanomami, state formation in Madagascar, the homicide rate of New York City, polygamy in the

Mormons or the political radicalisation of British foxhunters seeks, in essence, to understand why one social practise spreads in society rather than another. A concise book, *The Social Animal* hints at the abundance of this view of society, but for the full flavour it is necessary to read the *Treatise*, a work which in its breadth of conception and wealth of naturalistic detail resembles nothing so much as the *Origin of Species* itself.

May Lord Runciman have the modesty to blush at the comparison. But before he does, let me note that the *Treatise* shares some of the *Origin*'s deficiencies as well. Powerful though the ideas may be, they are also crude. It is a limitation of language. Evolutionary dynamics -- biological or social -- are far more complex and subtle in their causes and consequences than mere English, even Mandarin English, can ever capture. Evolutionary biologists have known this since the 1930's when Darwinism, at the time all but moribund, was reborn with a mathematical machine for a heart -- the so called Neo-Darwinian Synthesis. It was, and is, a machine of great power and formal beauty which allows the consequences of evolutionary forces to be examined with thoroughness and precision. The theory of social selection requires something like it. Runciman convinces us that societies have evolved, illustrates how they may have done so, and provides the elementary logic of social selection. Grand as this is, it is nothing like a predictive and testable theory of social evolution; for that, a mathematical account of the origin, transmission, and selection of social practises is required. Founded on the mathematics of natural selection, such a theory would have a brisk start in life (indeed, something like it already exists for cultural artefacts), but since society certainly contains many more ways in which the Darwinian dynamic can work than does organic life, the infant would swiftly outstrip its parent. The nurturing of this theory from its origins in Runciman's thought will be a task that is daunting and yet marvellous, for the reward is little less than a universal formal language for sociology. And when it is done then, truly, shall we say that Darwin lives @LSE.