

# Evolution and Organic Analogy in R.F. Irvine's Economics

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Notwithstanding economists' insistence that their discipline restricts itself to material reality - the world of nature, of which science treats - they tend to persist with abstractions based on questionable assumptions concerning 'human nature' (the 'rational' - i.e. self-interested - consumer, etc.) without, it would seem, overly concerning themselves with the actual physical and psychical realities with which they are dealing. Human beings are a complex and intelligent species which have evolved sophisticated modes of social life over many millennia. Any 'social science' - i.e. a science which takes as its field of investigation some aspect of human social behaviour, and economics claims to be one - surely needs to take these factors into account. But economics rarely does.

Even Marx, who never ceased telling his readers that his was the only truly 'scientific' approach, and that his standpoint was one "from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history",<sup>1</sup> in the end fails to entirely convince, in that he really has very little to say about 'human nature', and the latter's ultimate grounding through evolutionary processes in the rest of animate nature, in his published writings. Darwin is quoted only twice in *Capital*, and that is in two footnotes in Volume I, where Marx is seeking to show that 'nature's technology' - the development of organs in plants and animals - has its counterpart in human history in technological progress, which Marx describes as the development of "the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organisation."<sup>2</sup> It is true that Marx was an admirer of Darwin,<sup>3</sup> and indeed liked to see himself as writing from an evolutionary perspective, but he does not at all clearly show (though he was moving in that direction - see below) how his vision of the unfolding of human history links up with a Darwinian view of 'human nature'.

Economists in the Marxian tradition seem for the most part to have inherited this difficulty and to have decided that the best thing to do is simply leave Darwin out of the picture altogether; something which has been easy enough to do since their academic training has usually not brought them into any contact with that writer's thought. C.P. Snow's 'two cultures'<sup>4</sup> is certainly not a recent phenomenon, and indeed there is little evidence that things are changing in this sense. It remains an extraordinary fact that training in economics - a discipline which perhaps above all the other 'social sciences' aspires to scientific status - usually contains no component of studies in human biology, psychology or related disciplines (even sociology is frequently not an obligatory subject). Little wonder that 'human nature' has generally been of little real interest to economists - notwithstanding the amount of

theorising that has been built on the basis of assumptions concerning the same.

There have, of course, been exceptions. Actually Marx, writing before he had probably ever heard of Darwin, showed evidence that questions of human nature were, in fact, very much on his mind. In a remarkable passage in a manuscript discovered after his death and not published till 1903 (in German), and apparently originally intended to be an Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx wrote:

The further back we trace the course of history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent on and to belong to a larger whole. ... Man is a *Zoon politikon* in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individualised only within society. Production by a solitary individual outside society ... is just as preposterous as the development of speech without individuals who live together and talk to one another.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately there is no evidence that Marx ever followed up these insightful remarks in terms of Darwin's views on 'human nature', as contained in *The Descent of Man* (1871). This may have saved much agonising over such questions by Marxists (not only Marxist economists, but others as well - e.g. 'dialectical biologists'<sup>6</sup>), who have not felt led to read the latter work since Marx himself nowhere refers to it. Thus the occasional economist writing from a perspective somewhere on the Left, and who has been interested in these matters, has been largely forced to discover for him or herself what Darwin actually has to say in the above work and which Marx was feeling towards.

One such writer was R.F. Irvine, Professor of Economics at the University of Sydney from 1912 to 1922. Irvine is an interesting figure in the history of Australian economic thought for a number of reasons, not least of which are his 'pre-Keynesian' underconsumptionist views expressed, for example, in hearings before the Australian Commonwealth Arbitration Court in the early 1930s, where Irvine represented a number of trade unions, and in his privately published *The Midas Delusion* (1933). Irvine's views in this regard have been commented upon by others,<sup>7</sup> and need not be re-examined in detail here. But what has not been previously noticed in Irvine's writing has been his deep interest in questions of 'human nature' and societal evolution, and how this influenced his economic thinking. To investigate this subject, it will be necessary to look at some of Irvine's earlier writing, and such indications of possible influences on his thinking as can be gauged from this.

It should be said firstly that Irvine, like most economists perhaps (as an unavoidable legacy of their training), very likely habitually thought in abstractions. To move beyond this was not an easy task. Thinking about economics, and thinking about the actual world of experience, seems to have occupied almost separate compartments of his mind, at least in his earlier writing. This shows up in an examination of Irvine's use of evolutionary and organic concepts. In his first book, *The Progress of New Zealand in the Century* (1902), which he co-authored with O.T.J. Alpers, a former fellow-student from Canterbury University College, Christchurch, New Zealand, Irvine has much material (he wrote the first few chapters of the book, which contain this material) on the tribal life and 'primitive communism' of the Maoris. But he nowhere specifically relates this information to his economic interests at the time, which concerned the development of communications networks in New

Zealand and the importance of these for such early industries as gold and fossil resin mining, wool, and flax growing. Irvine's socialistic propensities are also evident in this book, and in a section where he is discussing the parochialism of white-settler Provincial Councils, he shows that he is already thinking of societies in holistic, organic terms: "They laboured under the mistake that a strong central government is incompatible with good local government ... giving free rein to that self-centering process which makes it so difficult, except in the face of immediate danger, for Anglo-Saxon communities to sacrifice the smaller good for the greater."<sup>10</sup> An obvious opportunity existed here for Irvine to link such generalisations with his observations regarding the strong sense of community spirit found among the Maoris, but he nowhere does this in the volume in question. It was to be another thirty years before he was to make this connection, in *The Midas Delusion*, which will be looked at below.

The idea of organic community, or the 'social organism' as some authors have expressed it, emerges more strongly in Irvine's writing over the next decade or so. In a *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Question of the Housing of Workmen in Europe and America*, published in 1913, and of which Irvine was the author (he was commissioned by the Holman Labor government of N.S.W. to carry out this enquiry the previous year), Irvine uses such expressions as "like other things, the city must grow and take on new functions";<sup>11</sup> and in an address on *The Place of the Social Sciences in a Modern University* to the Melbourne University Association in May 1914 which was later published as a small book, Irvine specifically draws attention to the organic metaphor, albeit in cautionary terms:

There have been many attempts to express the nature of the unity we call society. Most of them have been based on imperfect analogies. Thus it has been figured as a mechanism or as an organism of a particular kind; but these analogies, though sometimes helpful, have often proved misleading. The most we can say is that society, though not an organism, is nevertheless organically connected, held together by pervasive psychical forces.<sup>12</sup>

The 'social organism' is of course an old idea, dating back at least to Shakespeare,<sup>13</sup> but it is perhaps most commonly associated with Herbert Spencer, who makes much use of the concept, particularly in *First Principles*.<sup>14</sup> Irvine may have learnt the idea from this author, (or possibly learnt it secondhand through the writings of William Hearn, Melbourne University's first Professor of Political Economy, who dissuses Spencer's idea in his 1863 book, *Plutology*<sup>15</sup>), but it seems more likely that he obtained it from two other writers, viz. Henry George and J.A. Hobson, to whom he specifically acknowledges an intellectual debt in *The Midas Delusion*.<sup>16</sup> The place of organic analogy in Hobson's works is clearly enough suggested in some of their titles - e.g. *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism* and *The Physiology of Industry*<sup>17</sup> and in George it is made explicit in such passages as this one, from *Social Problems* "As in the development of species, the power of conscious, co-ordinated action of the whole being must assume greater and greater relative importance to the automatic action of parts, so it is in the development of society. This is the truth in socialism, which, although it is being forced upon us by industrial progress and social development, we are so slow to recognize."<sup>18</sup>

But such language is purely at the level of abstraction, and as Irvine indicates in the above quote from *The Place of the Social Sciences in a Modern University*, he is already

beginning to move beyond this level of thinking. The hint that he is doing so is contained in his reference to 'psychical' forces. Such attractive forces operate between the real people making up societies. Irvine's immediately following lines expand on what he means: "But however we conceive of this unity, the centre of interest must always and everywhere be men. Behind all religions, ethics, legislations and governments have stood red-blooded men and women, driving through as best they could their judgements, ideals, passions and interests. If we forget this, we spend our days in a make-believe world of abstractions, ghosts among still thinner ghosts."<sup>19</sup> The question remains, however, What is the nature of these organic / psychic links? On this, Irvine is not particularly forthcoming in *The Place of the Social Sciences in a Modern University*, through he does give some indication of the tenor of his thought. Earlier in the lecture, when defining what he meant by the 'social sciences', Irvine explained that he had in mind those disciplines which dealt with "some aspect of associated human life" - not in an abstract sense, but in a way which took into account "human impulses, interests, and activities."<sup>20</sup>

Irvine also makes it clear in this lecture that he is thinking in evolutionary terms. At one point he notes: "Economists, though to-day they accept some theory of evolution, have nevertheless been rather in the habit of analysing the present situation as if it were final"<sup>21</sup> and elsewhere, specifically relating the concept of human "association" with evolution, he explains: "Sociology ... is to be regarded as a general and co-ordinating science, deriving its data from Biology and Psychology on the one hand, and from the special social sciences on the other. It invades all territory from which it may get evidence as to the process of human association and evolution as a whole."<sup>22</sup> For Irvine, then, societies are all about human beings associating together, and this has something to do with evolutionary processes. Beyond this Irvine does not go in this 1914 lecture, but a further hint as to the direction in which his ideas were moving is contained, I would suggest, in a passing reference which he makes in the lecture to a former luminary at Melbourne University, the philosopher Alexander Sutherland, whose 2-volume *Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct*<sup>23</sup> is mentioned by Irvine as one of the university's more notable contributions to scholarship in the 'social sciences'.

As its title suggests, this not very well known work deals with its subject from an evolutionary point of view. Briefly, Sutherland's argument is that human ethical systems have originated, ultimately, in the social instincts of 'lower' animals, and with regard to primates specifically, most immediately stem from the need for prolonged parental care for offspring in these species (due to the slow maturation rate and relative helplessness - as compared with other mammalian species - of juvenile monkeys and apes). These instincts, in Sutherland's view, show themselves in behaviours indicative of feelings of 'sympathy' and 'affection' of mother primates towards their young, and are the basis of similar feelings among members of larger social groupings. The evolution of these feelings and related behaviours has been due, Sutherland contended, to natural selection, in that such feelings and behaviours have a cohesive influence thus enabling greater collective 'fitness' (in the face of a common enemy, for example) in the 'struggle for existence'. Co-operative behaviour and 'altruism', which eventually become formalised in human legal and ethical codes, etc., can thus be viewed, according to Sutherland, as part and parcel of the same evolutionary process.<sup>24</sup>

All this had actually been earlier argued by Darwin, in *The Descent of Man* (in a chapter on 'The Moral Sense'), and Sutherland readily acknowledged a debt to Darwin's pioneering work in this field. But Darwin had also (much more so than Sutherland) included another element in his conception of the evolution of human ethics - human reasoning capacity. Darwin's position is neatly encapsulated in this passage from *The Descent of Man*:

The social animals which stand at the bottom of the [evolutionary] scale are guided almost exclusively, and those which stand higher in the scale are largely guided, by special instincts in the aid which they give to the members of the same community; but they are likewise in part impelled by mutual love and sympathy. ... Although man ... has no special instincts to tell him how to aid his fellow-man, he still has the impulse, and with his improved intellectual faculties would naturally be much guided in this respect by reason and experience.<sup>25</sup>

The propensity of human beings to associate together in societies, then, for Darwin and Sutherland, and I would argue, for Irvine, is one of the primary characteristics of our species, and has probably been inherited from our evolutionary past. Such association involves co-operation and mutual aid, without which societal living would be impossible. As noted, Irvine had spoken of "impulses" in the context of human association, and the similarity with Darwin's use of the term is unmistakable.

Irvine's socialistic leanings (as well as having close connections with the trade union movement, he was a prime mover in the establishment of the Workers' Educational Association in New South Wales and he spoke frequently on behalf of Guild Socialism and the Co-operative movement<sup>26</sup>) were closely bound up with his interest in these facets of 'human nature'. In this, Irvine stood very close to Engels (although I have found no reference to this author in Irvine's writing). In Engels' 1888 Introduction to the English translation of *The Communist Manifesto* he has the following lines:

In 1847 [when Marx and Engels originally wrote the work] the pre-history of society, the social organization existing previous to recorded history, was all but unknown. Since then ... village communities have been found to be the primitive form of society everywhere from India to Ireland. The inner organization of this primitive communistic society was laid bare, in its typical form by [Lewis H.] Morgan's crowning discovery of the true nature of the gens and its relation to the tribe. With the dissolution of these primal communities society begins to be differentiated into separate and finally antagonistic classes.<sup>27</sup>

This concept of "primitive communism" was elaborated on considerably by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, in which he notes that among the Iroquois Indians, for example, "the household is maintained by a number of families in common and is communistic; the land belongs to the tribe, only the small gardens are allotted provisionally to the householders," and that "[t]here cannot be any poor or needy - the communistic household and the gens know their responsibilities towards the old, the sick and those disabled in war."<sup>28</sup> Irvine would have been fully in accord with Engels here. In a chapter headed "The Way We Have

Come' in *The Midas Delusion* Irvine explains that

In the earliest primitive societies, the self-sufficing clans or hordes, the group was paramount. ... It was bound together by ties of kinship. All within the group were regarded as comrades, ... there was complete community of goods as well as of labour. In surviving groups at this stage, generosity is highly esteemed, being placed next to bravery. Hospitality to strangers was also a common feature. ... The idea of individual property, which plays such an important part in later stages, was entirely absent, except that weapons, tools, and armaments were commonly recognized as personal possessions. The clan might consist of a number of families.<sup>29</sup>

The particularly interesting thing about Irvine's discussion on this subject is that it is based on his observations of Maori tribal life in New Zealand (to which country Irvine had migrated with his family from Scotland when a child in the 1860s) - a people not mentioned in Engels' book. As noted earlier, Irvine had described the Maoris' traditional way of life in *The Progress of New Zealand in the Century*, but he apparently had not then associated his interest in this subject with his economic interests. By the time he wrote *The Midas Delusion*, however, he had made this connection. In fact, most of the next few paragraphs is lifted directly from the former book and reproduced in the latter in support of Irvine's argument for the existence of 'primitive communism'. The Maori tribe, Irvine explained,

was a commune organised for peace or war. Its communal character escaped the notice of early settlers, who were extremely puzzled to understand the nature of the Maori customs and especially their land laws. ... There was no individual ownership in the English sense. ... The land was the property of the tribe and none of it would be disposed of without the sanction of the tribe. ...

The Maoris had no desire to accumulate wealth or property. A large catch of fish was valued merely because it permitted a lavish hospitality. So in other matters it was deemed a disgrace to possess riches except for the purpose of squandering it. The father did not accumulate for the spending of the son; his weapons of war, whatever belongings he set most store by, were interred with his bones. Under these circumstances and in a country where food was obtainable at a moderate expenditure of labour, there was no glaring inequalities of social condition. None was rich and none was absolutely destitute. Even the lazy man whose "throat was deep" could get himself fed, and the feeble or unfortunate were able to share in the results of the fishing or snaring.<sup>30</sup>

That Irvine is thinking of this 'primitive communism' in evolutionary terms, i.e. as evidence of underlying co-operative instincts inherited from our species' evolutionary past, is clear enough from some further observations which he makes in *The Midas Delusion*. Immediately following the above quoted lines from this work (before his discussion on the Maoris), Irvine writes: "The original social binding force appears to have been the instinctive love of mothers for their offspring, and there is a large body of evidence tending to prove that most societies have passed through a matriarchal phase in which social authority was vested in women."<sup>31</sup> Again, the similarity with Darwin's and Sutherland's writing is unmistakable. In *Descent of Man* Darwin argued that the "feeling of pleasure from society is probably an extension of the parental or filial affections, since the social instinct seems to be

developed by the young remaining for a long time with their parents; and this extension may be attributed ... chiefly to natural selection";<sup>32</sup> and Sutherland, expanding on the idea, averred:

[T]he mighty roots of sympathy which the parental and conjugal relations have already established, are always there, prepared to spread out into a general social sympathy, whenever and wherever an advantage is likely to arise therefrom. ... Thus the emergent type in the end is that wherein parental and conjugal sympathies widen out, as possibilities arise, into social sympathies; for, where the individual favoured of fortune is impelled ... to lend a helping hand to other individuals under less happy circumstances, the average chances of the race are thereby improved.<sup>33</sup>

Actually, John Ruskin is another author from whom Irvine may have learnt this 'sympathy' idea with its origins in parental affection. In *The Midas Delusion* Irvine acknowledges an intellectual debt to this author as well as the others already mentioned, and especially to *Unto This Last*, which, Irvine explains, was generally read in first year courses when he was a university student and contains "extraordinarily rich veins of thought" and was "almost as revolutionary as Karl Marx".<sup>34</sup> In this volume, Ruskin argues for the co-operative spirit as one of the "laws of life", and he gives an illustration of what he means by asking the reader to imagine a family with only a crust of bread between them: "If the mother eats it, the children want it; if the children eat it, the mother must go hungry to her work. Yet it does not necessarily follow that there will be 'antagonism' between them, that they will fight for the crust, and that the mother, being strongest, will get it, and eat it."<sup>35</sup>

As already mentioned, Irvine regarded himself as a socialist of sorts, or at least as having strong inclinations in that direction. Broadly speaking, socialism claims to be based on the *co-operative* rather than the *competitive* principle, and has to do primarily with distribution rather than with profits. The general ideal was summed up by Marx in the third volume of *Capital*, where he expressed the opinion that the Co-operative societies just beginning to be established in England at his time of writing represented "within the old form [of society] the beginnings of the new" where "the antagonism between capital and labour is overcome."<sup>36</sup> Another feature of socialism - at least in the Marxian tradition - is its emphasis on *organisation*. An efficient economic order, according to socialists, cannot be left to the vagaries and unpredictabilities of the market. Irvine sums up the socialist position in terms of both these dimensions in *The Midas Delusion*: "Plainly ... competition, so far from being a reliable instrument of efficiency, is in many respects a principle of anarchy, making for great waste of effort, of natural resources, and of human energy and quality. It is the negation of co-operation and organisation."<sup>37</sup>

It is in this area of organisation that Irvine finds the 'organic' metaphor (both words have a common root) particularly useful. And interestingly, Irvine was able to tie in the organisation concept with his Darwinian view of social evolution. In a lecture on 'National Organisation and National Efficiency' given before the Victorian Railways Institute in 1915, Irvine argued: "It is evident that, if a nation is to survive [the Darwinian concept], its whole life, political, economic, social, must be so ordered that it does not readily succumb to internal diseases [the metaphor], or fall a victim to the aggression of other societies. It must be so ordered that every individual comprising it feels that it is worth fighting for. ... Survival implies purposeful

organization in every part of national life."<sup>38</sup> In other words, for Irvine societies, prove themselves 'fit' or otherwise in the struggle for existence according to the degree to which they are efficiently organised (which in turn involves co-operation).

Irvine saw an important role for trade unions in this process. In an earlier lecture on 'Trade Unionism and Efficiency' given at a symposium organised by the Workers' Educational Association in Sydney he noted that "workingmen have shown that they are capable of a high degree of organisation for special purposes", and he went on to suggest that the unions could serve as the basis for a reorganisation of society along co-operative lines.<sup>39</sup> Trade unions, through their success in achieving "combination for a human standard of living" had "hastened the general progress of society" Irvine maintained.<sup>40</sup> As he later explained to the Railways Institute: "Combination is superior to competition because it implies co-operation."<sup>41</sup> Again, this idea had been suggested by Marx, who wrote in volume 1 of *Capital*: "When the labourer co-operates systematically with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capability of his species."<sup>42</sup>

But Irvine's vision was not restricted to the value of more co-operative economic systems to individual societies. His writing is also distinguished by its *universalism*, and in this he can be seen to have not only owed something to Marx and Engels ('Workers of All Countries, Unite'), but also to Darwin. In keeping with the important place he sees for reason in human social evolution, Darwin, in *Descent of Man*, follows the last quoted passage in this work with the following words: "As man advances in civilisation, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races."<sup>43</sup> Irvine was apparently at one with Darwin in these sentiments. The final chapter of *The Midas Delusion* is headed 'Economic Nationalism and World Co-operation', and is an appeal to the major nations of the time (the 1930s) to abandon the ultra-nationalism which was sending them headlong into world war and to adopt a more co-operative and internationalist spirit. But perhaps Irvine's most eloquent plea along these lines had been penned several years before, in some articles in a little-known Hawaiian magazine based on a series of W.E.A. lectures given in Sydney. The following excerpt is taken from the third and final of these articles, which concerned international relations in the Pacific. In this excerpt, Irvine shows that he has by now overcome any dichotomy which may have previously existed in his thinking, and has succeeded in tying together the organicism of writers like Hobson, George etc. with the scientific evolutionism of Darwin:

Quite aside from the impossibility of standing alone, the ambition of any part [of the Pacific region], like Australia, to enter upon a career of independent nationalism is based upon a false and reactionary ideal.

It depends solely on one of two great factors of human progress - the individualising, centrifugal and disruptive tendency in growing societies, and ignores the co-operative tendency from which alone we may venture to hope for a warless world in the future. ...

The more enlightened principle of unity recognises both the individualising and co-operative tendencies. It involves the possibility of a new and less



self-regarding type of nationalism, which recognises common human aims and a unity which in actual fact exists; a unity, however, which is subject to chronic disturbance owing to the survival of an ideal of legal sovereignty incompatible with permanent harmony.<sup>44</sup>

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