

Conference Review

The Darwinian Renaissance in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Held November 2009 at Queen Mary University of London

The purpose of this one-day conference, held at Queen Mary University of London and supported by the Galton Institute, the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, and the European Human Behaviour and Evolution Association, was to discuss and debate the rise of Darwinian thinking in the humanities and social sciences. This was spurred by the fact that for several decades the humanities and social sciences (or HSS) have adopted certain epistemological perspectives which actively eschew scientific and especially biological understanding. In so doing they have forsaken a theoretical framework (evolution) that provides coherence, breadth and depth to the understanding of human behaviour. On the other hand, and in spite of this history of ideological criticism, what might be termed the Human Evolutionary Behavioural Sciences (HEBS) have flourished. In this meeting we showcased new and exciting work from within HEBS as applied to the traditional humanities and social sciences, and examined where efforts should be focused in the future. Seven speakers and one keynote, all of whom are young researchers in their fields, gave talks from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to an audience of 70 delegates. The talks concerned the application of evolutionary theory in a range of fields including anthropology, demography, politics, culture, archaeology, psychology, and development.

The conference began with three talks on the application of evolutionary principles to our understanding of cultural transmission with specific examples, such as those from archeology and social psychology (Alex Mesoudi, Alex Bentley and Stephen Lycett). The next talk took on a core concern in psychology – mate choice – and demonstrated how we can successfully use sexual selection theory to illuminate this (Ian Penton-Voak). Subsequent talks focused on the state-of-the-art in evolutionary anthropology (Mhairi Gibson) and evolutionary demography (Rebecca Sear). These talks also provided an important historical and social context to how academic disciplines might hope to develop within a Darwinian framework and within the UK university system (for example, delegates were shown how this has begun to bear fruit in the field of demography). The main series of talks ended with an analysis of how global security concerns, a central topic in politics, could demonstrably benefit from models of evolutionary change (Dominic Johnson).

A keynote address was given by Daniel Nettle on the necessity of thinking about human behaviour and affairs in a “Tinbergian” sense. This talk also provided healthy and important cautionary notes for scholars within HEBS and HSS. This was followed by a “question time” session with a panel comprising all the speakers which resulted in active

debate around the core topics of the meeting. A wine reception at the end of the evening resulted in even further discussion.

In sum, these talks provided a thought-provoking range of responses to the title of the conference, and will no doubt stimulate further debate. We are currently in discussions to organize a special issue of the *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, to which speakers at the event will be invited to contribute manuscripts.

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