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Is Capitalism in Our Genes? Competition, Cooperation and the Idea of Homo Oeconomicus From An Evolutionary Perspective

Abstract In the last few years a growing number of academic disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences have turned to the evolutionary approach: Evolutionary Economics, among these disciplines, is a thriving subfield of Economics, which adopts Darwin's evolutionary ideas and concepts for the understanding of economic system and modes of production. Evolutionary hypotheses such as the „selfish gene“ idea, the ideas of „inclusive fitness“, „struggle for life“ and „survival of the fittest“ may suggest – and have indeed suggested – that humans are rational self-interest individuals, doing what they can to increase their own reproductive chances or at least the chances of their close relatives („inclusive fitness“). To put it differently, evolutionary theory seems to suggest that *capitalism* (in a broad sense) is a system that has co-evolved with humans and best fits our evolved psychology. Is this the whole story? Is *capitalism* „in our genes“? In this paper I argue that conclusions such as „we are born to be rational self-interested agents“ or „capitalism is encoded in our genome“ are the result of a misleading application of Darwin's evolutionary theory to human socio-economic processes, mainly to justify a (Western) society based on selfish principles, but which is not *naturally* selfish in itself. Evolution seems to be the result of cooperative, not only (or not *mainly*) competitive processes, and the model of *Homo oeconomicus*, that is the idea that humans are rational self-interested agents always trying to maximize profit, is, also from an bio-evolutionary perspective, nothing more than a fictional exercise.

119

Keywords: Charles Darwin; Survival of the Fittest; Evolutionary Economics; Symbiogenesis; Altruism; Cooperation; Elinor Ostrom

Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), a book that contributed to the revolutionary change of our understanding of the origin of life, of the development of species and of the role of humans in the natural world, was notoriously inspired, among other sources, by social scientists such as Adam Smith and particularly Robert Malthus. In various writings, including the famous *Essay on the Principle of population as it affects the future improvement of society* (1798, first edition) Malthus portrayed economic life as a dynamic process driven by two fundamental forces, population growth and the „means of subsistence“.

Although Darwin's main concern was a strictly biological one, namely how to provide a suitable scientific explanation for the origin and flourishing of life on our Earth and its differentiation in species, it took no more than a few years for his evolutionary theory to be extended beyond its proper domain

in the natural sciences. To cite but an example, the English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer, who came to appreciate the power of natural selection with the publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, explicitly referred to Darwin's principles of evolution for his psychological/sociological investigations.

However, it is especially in the last three or two decades of the twentieth century, as a result of the new interest in the naturalization project in the humanities, that an increasing number of disciplines within the human and the social sciences have massively started to turn to evolutionary theory to find explanations for various aspects of human behaviour. We count today, then, an „Evolutionary Ethics“, an „Evolutionary Epistemology“, an „Evolutionary Linguistics“ and, obviously, also an „Evolutionary Economics“, the main topic of the present paper. While the project of constructing an evolutionarily inspired economic theory has been ostracized during most of the 20th century, interest in this endeavour has increased again over the last two-three decades.

120

1. Evolution and economics

The first use of the term „evolutionary economics“ in English was probably by Thorstein Veblen (in 1898), although Veblen's disciples set quite rapidly this Darwinian legacy apart. The term became more widespread with the publication, in the 80s, of Richard Nelson's and Sidney Winter's *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change* (1982), where Darwin's evolutionary theory is used as an innovative tool to analyse „a wide range of phenomena associated with economic change stemming either from shifts in product demand or factor supply conditions, or from innovation on the part of firms“ (Nelson, Winter 1982: 3). Today Evolutionary Economics is a burgeoning, lively sub-field of economic studies, with its own academic journals and centres of research.

Now, in this paper I do not intend to describe extensively or to analyse critically the state of the art in contemporary Evolutionary Economics or specific aspects or hypotheses within the discipline. My aim is much more restricted: I will focus, moving from Darwin's *Origin of Species*, on some problematical passages, misunderstandings and pitfalls along the path that has progressively led to the full application – as it is attested in today's research world – of Darwin's theory to economics.

In the past years, prominent thinkers have claimed that a number of different economic systems (capitalism, socialism, communism and so forth) would dominate in what they described as a social version of Darwinian evolution. A glance at the main events of recent history confirms that they were almost all wrong.

In a nutshell, what I am going to suggest in this paper is that, although motifs or themes coming from the fields of the social sciences and economics can

indeed be found in abundance in the works of Charles Darwin, the relationship between Darwin's theory and economic theory has been in the past century a history *both* of intrinsic affinity and of deep misunderstanding. In this controversial and complicated story our central concept, the concept of *capitalism*, plays a crucial role.

2. No direction

Let me start with a terminological remark, which I assume my reader is already familiar with. The well-known expression „the survival of the fittest“, frequently attributed to Darwin, does not stem from Darwin's works, but from Herbert Spencer's, namely from his *Principles of Biology* (1864), where Spencer used the phrase for the first time.

Among the first supporters of Darwin's evolutionary theory, Spencer believed that, as species compete with one another in the natural world, to get food and to escape predators, similarly in the human community different types of society compete with one another. Spencer was persuaded that in his own epoch two types of societies, the „militant“ and the „industrial“, were competing, and that the industrial society was destined to take over and win.

Along a similar line, the Nobel Prize winning Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek presented in his last works (particularly in *The Fatal Conceit: the Errors of Socialism*, published in 1988) an evolutionarily inspired theory, suggesting that the human civilization is the result of the emergence and spread of the concept and practice of private property, leading to economic growth, trade, and eventually to the modern capitalist system, which in Hayek's eyes is an example of spontaneously emerging order. Capitalism is the economic system destined to prevail in the history of human civilization because, in comparison with any alternative system, it can support a higher human population growth rate. Both Spencer and Hayek, inspired by Darwin's theory, argued for the existence of an order, a „fate“, intrinsic to the human society and spontaneously leading to the affirmation of the industrial society, according to Spencer, and of capitalism, according to Hayek.

Now, my first, general point in this paper is to stress with emphasis that all attempts to use Darwin's evolutionary theory, as it is the case with Spencer and Hayek, to identify a „direction“ in the development of economic systems *are not* really Darwinian in their inspiration. The key feature of Darwin's theory is that evolution has no overall direction or, to put it another way, that we cannot determine in advance the trajectory that the evolutionary process will follow. „Evolution“ doesn't mean improvement or progress, it means just *change*, and things are largely (although not completely) unpredictable in the way they can change and „evolve“. The evolution of species occurs as part of a process of variation and selection according to local-contingent environmental pressures, and all hypotheses of societies evolving

towards a common end-point – capitalism, for instance – involve a basic misunderstanding of Darwinian evolution.

3. Evolutionary economics today

As mentioned above, evolutionary economics is today a burgeoning and very lively research field, in restless expansion. Simplifying the field for the sake of clarity, we can say that there are today two main schools of thought, or currents, which have developed largely independently of each other: the first current is called *generalised Darwinism*; the second is its opponent, called *continuity hypothesis*.

122

In recent years *generalised Darwinism* has been mainly championed by Geoffrey Hodgson, from the University of Herfordshire, and Thorbjorn Knudsen, from the University of Southern Denmark, in books and specialised articles (see Hodgson, Knudsen 2010; Hodgson 2013). Instead of reasoning in terms of analogy, transferring a theory (Darwinian theory), originally emerged within the field of biology, into rather different domains such as economics or social sciences, Hodgson and Knudsen specify three general principles, *variation*, *inheritance* (or *replication*) and *selection*, and define them in such an abstract way that they should no longer be confined to the biological domain. They are Darwinian *generalized* principles: not biological, but *ontological* principles. Hodgson and Knudsen argue that in any system in which these ontological principles are present Darwinian evolution occurs. It was just a chance that the first „official“ scientific demonstration of the action of these three principles was in the biological field, with the theory of evolution by means of natural selection (Darwin 1859). According to the *generalised Darwinism*, the degree to which some entities (firms, for instance) are relatively successful leads to the spread or decline of the frequency of their properties in the population. The frequency of the properties of successful entities tends to increase in the population, while the frequency of the properties of less successful entities tends to decrease (Vromen 2008).

The *continuity hypothesis*, mainly championed by Ulrich Witt (see Witt 2003, 2008), from the Max Planck Institute of Economics in Jena, Germany, rejects the high level of abstraction of *generalised Darwinism*, claiming that, instead of *generalising* Darwinian principles, so that they can be more easily applied to any field or domain of the human activity, we should focus on economics and its structural specificities. Moreover, we should take into account what evolutionary theory tells us about the adaptive (physical, physiological, psychological) modifications that our body and mind have undergone in the course of evolution. Indeed, Ulrich Witt and his collaborators argue that economic evolution proceeds on the basis of, and is largely influenced by the outcomes of, previous processes of biological evolution. For instance, drawing on the main tenets and assumptions of contemporary evolutionary

psychology, Witt claims that the basic needs, psychological dispositions and non-cognitive forms of learning that our ancient human ancestors have evolved over the course of their history as a species, still influence the behaviour of today's human beings, actors in the contemporary economic arena.

4. Critical remarks

In this section I would like to raise some critical remarks on the main tenets of the two aforementioned schools of thought in Evolutionary Economics, particularly on *generalized Darwinism*.

One should always be cautious in extending principles or assumptions beyond the proper domain in which they have originally emerged. This does not mean, obviously, that interdisciplinary research programmes are in principle impossible or that the trans-disciplinary use of concepts and terms should be avoided, but that there are however some methodological issues that should be taken into account.

As evolutionary scholar Alex Mesoudi persuasively argued in his book *Cultural evolution* (Mesoudi 2011), cultural evolutionary processes and evolutionary processes in biology are not coincident or totally overlapping phenomena. While we can certainly claim that cultural evolution follows Darwinian principles, in that it exhibits the properties of variation, competition and inheritance that Darwin described in the *Origin of Species*, it seems that it doesn't follow *neo-Darwinian* principles of evolution. According to neo-Darwinism, i.e. the „new shape“ that Darwinism assumed after its integration with Mendelian genetics at the beginning of the twentieth century, the genetic inheritance is always particulate and non-Lamarckian, and the genetic mutation is blind. Now, cultural traits in humans are not particulate and their spread across generations is not totally blind; moreover, they seem to follow a Lamarckian or a quasi-Lamarckian way of transmission.

Taking into account these differences between Darwinism and neo-Darwinism, one may argue that some cultural phenomena are more Darwinian than others, whereas a significant proportion of events and trends within the field of human culture is not Darwinian or neo-Darwinian at all. This means, going back to Evolutionary Economics, that some economic processes may be truly Darwinian in their essence, others only minimally Darwinian and yet others not Darwinian at all. The view supported by Hodgson's and Knudsen's project of *generalized Darwinism*, in light of the fine distinctions made by Mesoudi and other scholars working within the field of cultural evolution, risks to result in an oversimplification of Darwinism and its role for human culture.

Moreover, and this is my second remark on *generalised Darwinism*, in their effort to generalise Darwinian principles Hodgson and Knudsen seem to refer to a specific (rather partial) „version“ of the evolutionary theory,

focused on the concepts of replicator (in the sense of Richard Dawkins's *The selfish gene*), replication, competition, rivalry, as if they were „the all story“ of Darwinism.

In opposition with Hodgson's and Knudsen's neo-Darwinism, recent findings in evolutionary biology seem to suggest today a progressive shift (or, at least, a more accurate focus) from random mutations, competition, and selection, towards co-operation, symbiogenesis, regulation, networks, self-organisation. I shall come back again to these issues in a later section. For now, let it suffice to say that, since the research program in evolutionary biology is currently undergoing a reassessment, with traditional principles of neo-Darwinism such as blind mutation and „extrapolationism“ being losing significance (obviously, without resulting completely irrelevant), *generalized Darwinism*, as a theoretical option and interdisciplinary effort, is probably no longer up to date (Kottenbauer 2009).

124

5. Cooperation

The reader of this paper is probably familiar with the plot and the main characters of Oliver Stone's cult-movie *Wall Street* (1987), which tells the story of Bud Fox (starring Charlie Sheen), a young stockbroker working in New York City, and Gordon Gekko, famous, unscrupulous and wealthy Wall Street player (starring Michael Douglas). One of the most popular speeches of the movie is Gekko's well-known „Greed is good“ speech, which has become a symbol of unrestrained greed in popular culture. Gekko says: „Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. *Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.* Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind“ (my emphasis).

I would like to recall your attention to the sentence „Greed [...] *clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit*“, which may help introduce to the next step of my argument in this paper.

In the years since the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of species*, also because of the massive and sometimes crude extension of Darwin's evolutionary principles beyond their proper domain in biology, a misleading and partial interpretation of Darwin's theory began spreading, particularly in the main-stream and popular culture: the idea of a Darwinian selfish man, exclusively driven by an impulse to the maximization of his/her fitness, i.e. to the accumulation of resources and goods in competition with the other members of the population. More recently, publications such as Richard Dawkins' *The selfish gene* (1976), that was a best-seller when first published, unintendedly turned out to contribute to this distortion. Still today, the „version“ of evolutionary theory that seems to be more popular (in the

media, in the TV-radio shows and newspapers, and in the mainstream culture) is focused on *selfish*, *greedy* behaviours, supposed to be intrinsic to humans, and on the idea that rivalry and greed, to the detriment of the co-specific competitors, are a natural evolutionary heritage of *Homo sapiens*. In short, and coming closer to the main topic of this paper, Darwin's theory is popularly supposed to claim that neo-liberal capitalism in *encoded in our genes*, is the result of *Homo sapiens'* evolutionary history.

Now, in what follows I would like to focus on some recent findings in evolutionary biology that, in the last decades, suggest an alternative scenario: not (only) rivalry or competition but (also) co-operation is an important principle of evolution. In other words, I would like to contribute to dismantle, as far as possible given the restricted limits of this paper, the misleading idea of a Darwinian greedy man, a *Homo oeconomicus* fruit of the evolutionary history.

125

6. An alternative story: cooperation and networking

Let me briefly mention some recent research achievements in evolutionary biology (with no aim of exhaustiveness), that focus on the role of cooperation and networking in the evolution of human and nonhuman animals:

1) Endosymbiotic theory

According to the so-called endosymbiotic theory, in early evolution eukaryotik cells (i.e. cells provided with a nucleus) came into existence because archaea-cells imported bacteria and let them become part of their cells. This theory, in other words, explains through a phenomenon of *cooperation* (between archaea-cells and bacteria) one of the most ground-breaking innovations in the history of life on our planet, that is the emergence of eukaryotik cells. As Lynn Margulis, American biologist who contributed to the endosymbiotic theory, famously wrote in her *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Evolution from Our Microbial Ancestors*: „The view of evolution as a chronic bloody competition among individuals and species, a popular distortion of Darwin's notion of „survival of the fittest“, dissolves before a new view of continual cooperation, strong interaction, and mutual dependence among life forms. Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking. Life forms multiplied and complexified by co-opting others, not just by killing them (Margulis and Sagan 1986: 14).

2) Multilevel selection and group selection theory

We know today that selfish interests often diverge from group interest; far from producing a regulated world, selfish competition leads to „arms races“, encouraging behaviours that not only cause harm to the group (in the inter-group

competition) but also provide no lasting advantages for individuals. Moving from this evidence, in 1999 Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson restored the hypothesis of group selection and multilevel selection in their book *Unto Others. The Evolution and Psychology of unselfish behaviour*. According to the authors, the traits that maximise the advantage of an individual, in competition with the members of his/her group, are different from the traits required for the group to function as a co-ordinated unit (while competing with other groups): „What’s good for my clan is not necessarily good for my nation. What’s good for my nation is not necessarily good for the global environment or economy“ (Sloan Wilson 2013, on line article; see Sloan Wilson 2015). Humans, as a matter of fact, show selfish, competitive and even violent behaviours towards the members of other groups, and seem to be spontaneously inclined to generous and cooperative behaviours towards the members of their own community. Greed, in short, is *not* (always) good: in a context of inter-group competition, a purely greedy and selfish conduct would eventually cause harm to the (greedy) individuals themselves.

126

7. Competition is the midwife of cooperation; cooperation is the midwife of competition

My aim with this paper is not to replace a „greedy“ interpretation of Darwinian evolution with a peaceful, harmonious, more comforting one. The truth, as for many things, lies always somewhere in the middle. This is also the opinion of Samuel Bowles, director of the Behavioural Sciences Program at the Santa Fe Institute and professor in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Siena, Italy, author of several books and papers on the topics of altruism, the emergence of cooperative behaviours in humans, and the idea of *Homo oeconomicus* (the *Economic Man*, led by purely selfish interests). In a paper published in „Nature“ in 2008, *Conflict: altruism’s midwife*, Bowles argues that altruism and generosity towards the members of the same group one belongs to have evolved hand in hand with violent and selfish behaviours towards the members of different groups. „Pre-historic burials of large numbers of men and women with smashed skulls, broken forearms and stone points embedded in their bones – as well as ethno-graphic studies of recent hunters and gatherers – strongly suggest that warfare was a leading cause of death in many ancestral populations. Yet at the same time, humans are unusually cooperative, collaborating with non-kin, for example in hunting and sharing food, on a scale unknown in other animals. Paradoxically, the grisly evidence of our warlike past may help explain our distinctly cooperative nature“ (Bowles 2008: 326).

Going back to our issues in Evolutionary Economics, we may argue from this that humans are equipped, as a result of their evolutionary history, to behave *flexibly* and *appropriately*, i.e. according to the particular circumstances they are embedded in. In other words, they are neither evolutionarily

predisposed exclusively to „capitalistic“ behaviours, rivalry, or competition, nor they have an exclusive „natural“ tendency to cooperation and altruism, *but* can behave either selfishly or generously depending on the context and on the particular environmental pressures acting on them. It is up to us to „adapt“ these environmental (social, cultural, economic) pressures in order to promote a cooperative and pro-social human environment. It’s a question of good practices.

8. Good practices for a better (Darwinian) world

In 2006 David Sloan Wilson began using his hometown, Binghamton, in the state of New York, as a kind of *open air lab* for the study of social behaviour in everyday life (Binghamton Neighborhood Project, BNP). By means of surveys, group activities, workshops and experimental studies, his main aim was to enhance pro-social behaviours among young people and adults, and to improve the quality of their life and of their social interactions. The most distinctive feature of BNP was its strong scientific foundation: scientists had the opportunity to „see“ Darwin’s evolutionary principles and tenets „in action“, applied to social systems, social interactions and inter-human relationships.

127

The idea at the basis of Sloan Wilson’s research program was the following: given that humans’ peculiarity, as we have seen, is to behave *flexibly*, either selfishly or generously depending on the environmental pressures acting on them, to modify these pressures (organizing a pro-social environment) may ensure an increase of cooperative behaviours and a decrease of greed and selfishness among humans. In order to develop the project, scientists worked on the mechanisms of human behavioural flexibility, that is on the mechanisms by which individuals calibrate their degree of pro-sociality to their social environment throughout their lives (Sloan 2015: 122), and, in light of these mechanisms, they tried to ensure conditions as more suitable as possible for the development of cooperative social interactions. Sloan Wilson and his collaborators found that „people have a snail-like ability to change their behaviour in response to the pro-sociality of their social environment, regardless of their past experience“ (Sloan Wilson 2015: 123).

American political economist and Nobel Prize winning Elinor Ostrom’s analyses of the governance of common pool resources (Ostrom 1990) played a significant role in Sloan Wilson’s research programme. As is known, Ostrom identified eight principles for the governance and management of common goods, i.e. cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a group or community, including water sources, fields, forests and so forth. These principles are: 1. Definition of clear boundaries (of the commons); 2. Rules (for the use of the commons) calibrated to local needs and conditions; 3. Possibility for those affected by the rules to participate in modifying the rules; 4. Rule-making rights of community members should be respected

by outside authorities; 5. Development of a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members' behaviour; 6. Use of graduated sanctions for rule violators; 7. Low-cost means for dispute resolution; 8. In case of large common resources, multi-level organization (for the use of the commons), from the lowest level up to the entire system. Just think of a common resource, like a forest, an irrigation system or that small green field in the middle of your neighbourhood that you (and your neighbours) are allowed to use for *open air* parties and similar activities. Ostrom's principles provide a useful and feasible guide in order to enjoy the commons without prevent or undermine other people's (living in the same area, therefore members of the same „group“ you belong to) enjoyment.

As Sloan Wilson remarks, Ostrom's principles can significantly contribute to the construction of pro-social intra-group environments or, to put it another way, following Ostrom's principles we can promote the emergence of altruistic behaviours among the members of the same group, enhance solidarity and cooperative practices and contribute to the decrease of selfish or greedy attitudes. *Environment* matters, and it matters exactly because human nature is evolutionarily *flexible*. Ostrom's principles are a good example of how to organize a pro-social „habitat“ for us, behaviourally „malleable“, evolutionarily both potential greedy and generous, humans.

128

9. Conclusions

To conclude, I would like to emphasize the home-take message from my short paper: as members of the species *Homo sapiens*, carefully shaped by natural selection over the course of evolutionary time, we are neither neoliberal capitalists „by nature“ (selfish, greedy, competitive) – as some interprets of Darwin's works seem still to claim – nor cooperative angels.

To the contrary, evidence shows that, evolutionarily speaking, altruism and greed have coexisted in us since the beginning, as two of the multiple facets of our intrinsic behavioural flexibility. Good practices for civil participation and governance, as those suggested by Ostrom, can contribute to regulate and „embed“ human selfish dispositions and to promote cooperative behaviours. It is up to us to decide in which direction to tip the scales.

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Da li nam je kapitalizam u genima? Kompeticija, kooperacija i ideja *Homo oeconomicusa* iz evolucione perspektive

Apstrakt

U poslednjih nekoliko godina sve veći broj akademskih oblasti u humanističkim i socijalnim naukama usmerio se ka evolucionom pristupu: među ovim disciplinama, evolucionarna ekonomija se snažno razvija kao podgrupa ekonomije i prilagodila je Darwinove evolucione ideje i pojmove razumevanju ekonomskih sistema i načina proizvodnje. Evolucione hipoteze, kao što su ideje „sebičnog gena“, „inkluzivne podobnosti“, „borbe za život“ i „opstanka najprilagođenijih“ mogu da sugerišu – kao što su i zaista sugerisale – da su ljudi racionalni pojedinci vođeni samointeresom i čine ono što mogu da bi povećali svoje vlastite reproduktivne šanse, ili bar šanse svojih najbližih srodnika („inkluzivna podobnost“). Drugačije rečeno, čini se da evolucionarna teorija sugerise kako je kapitalizam (u širokom smislu) sistem koji je koevoluirao sa ljudima i najbolje odgovara našoj psihologiji nastaloj tokom evolucije. Da li je to cela priča? Da li je kapitalizam „u našim genima“?

U ovom članku tvrdim da zaključci tipa „rođeni smo da budemo delatnici vođeni samointeresom“ ili „kapitalizam je enkodiran u našem genomu“ jesu rezultat obmanjujuće primene Darwinove teorije evolucije na ljudske socioekonomske procese, uglavnom da bi se opravdalo (zapadno) društvo zasnovano na principima sebičnosti, ali koje kao takvo nije *prirodno* sebično. Evolucija jeste, po svemu sudeći, rezultat kooperativnih, a ne samo (ili ne pre svega) kompetitivnih procesa, i model *Homo oeconomicusa*, odnosno ideja da su ljudi racionalni delatnici vođeni samointeresom koji uvek nastoje da maksimalizuju profit nije, takođe sa bioevolucionog stanovišta, ništa drugo no misaona vežba.

Ključne reči: Čarls Darwin, opstanak najprilagođenijih, evolucionarna ekonomija, simbiogeneza, altruizam, kooperacija, Elinor Ostrom