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Like another Chouannerie

Benjamin Kidd and the decline of left-wing Social Darwinism

August 20, 2018 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

Benjamin Kidd was a drunk paddy mick and civil service brat who made a good name for himself in the 1890s with a book called *Social Evolution* (<https://archive.org/stream/socialrevolution00kiddgoog>) (1894). He had Darwin, he had Weismann, he had a grand unified theory of Western social development (or a pretense of one in the making). He was, the closest comparison I can think of, the Malcolm Gladwell of his day. Consulted by such figures as Joseph Chamberlain, Arthur Balfour and Alfred Milner, read by many others including Theodore Roosevelt ("Social Evolution" sold over 250,000 copies), approved by Alfred Russell Wallace, Kidd was a man who had Important Things To Say. Another book of his, *Principles of Western Civilization* (1902), was translated into Chinese by Yen Fu and later heralded as a "great light to the future" by Liang Qichao, a mentor of Mao Zedong. For a long time, mainstream historiography typecast him as a Social Darwinist racist-capitalist-imperialist bogeyman, but in reality he was much worse than that — a smug, derivative and overinflated apostle of New Liberalism, bringing the people's budget and family planning at home, with the white man's burden exported abroad. No big admirer of Galton or Pearson, he was nevertheless a Darwinian sociologist in the literal sense, though an excessively melioristic one, and a fine example of a time when such reasoning was acceptable to fashionable people. Also a fine example of how such reasoning can trivially be spun to serve the ends of therapeutic-managerial Leviathan.

What was so attractive about *Social Evolution*, then?

Kidd storms in the preface with a self-consciously revolutionary intent, aiming to overturn all reigning principles of ethics and historical study upside down. He presents a thesis that he reiterates continuously: "That the moral law is the unchanging law of progress in human society is the lesson which appears to be written over all things. No school of theology has ever sought to enforce this teaching with the directness and emphasis which it appears that evolutionary science will in the future be justified in doing. In the silent and strenuous rivalry in which every section of the race is of necessity continually engaged, permanent success appears to be invariably associated with the ethical and moral conditions favourable to the maintenance of a high standard of social efficiency, and with those conditions only."

Utilitarianism cloaked with a veneer of thrill, adventure and the struggle for existence — the perfect credo for Manchester.

These ethical and moral conditions, the “slow and majestic progress which marks a natural evolution,” are later enumerated as universal education, universal suffrage and socialism, beyond “merely philanthropic sentiment,” but he has a few reservations about the latter.

A recurring theme in Kidd’s tome is the drawing of sharp dichotomies — reason is taken to be a purely destructive force and at variance with any type of altruistic feeling unless tamed by religion, which is effectively praised in consequentialist terms as what one might call “good social technology.” Indeed, this is one of Kidd’s big “innovations” from his perspective, that he has reconciled the battle between science and religion (which is a false premise he uncritically accepts) by granting that sure, religion is nonsense, but it’s nonsense that made us great. Not a very compelling or even novel theory, but it was still different from militant anthropocentric secularisms and theories about all religions as outgrowths of primitive ancestor cults that were then widely in vogue. Further still, he is a social organicist — but all the “organelles” that make up this social organism are in constant conflict with the whole. Socialism is quite rational, but also terrible because it will suspend the struggle of existence, bring about a state of panmixia (random mating) by reducing selection pressure — or perhaps an increase in genetic load as a more modern reader would say — but, still, it was inevitably going to happen anyway by the natural forces of evolutionary progress.

How is progress possible at all? By selection and rejection. Those at the top quadrants assert their superiority via enhanced reproductive fitness and progressively raise the mean. Where there is progress, there must be selection, and consequently there must be competition.

Progress is not merely desirable, but unavoidable. It can’t be helped. The history of life, Kidd says, is one of ceaseless progress on one hand and ceaseless stress and competition on the other. Not only that, but for there to be progress, there must also be ecological stress whereby each lifeform has to multiply beyond the average carrying capacity of its environment, in turn intensifying the selection process at a point of no return. This process is unbounded and unending, if any organism ever retrogrades it will be crushed by a competitor.

In short, the three C’s: ceaseless struggle, ceaseless selection, ceaseless progress.

There is no telos; all of this happens involuntarily as a result of push factors from uncontrollable external conditions.

Industrial society is the apogee of natural selection. The most industrialized peoples are marked by “love of action, the insatiable desire for strenuous energetic labour.” As the barriers of birth, class and privilege are everywhere being broken down, the rivalry has only gotten keener, the pace quicker and the stress severer. The individual is freest where selection is fullest and rivalry fairest. Hence the social predominance of the northern races, the heirs of a deep-seated physiological cause compelling them into their ascendancy.

All of this is arational. Indeed, according to Kidd there can be no sanction in human reason for societies where large masses live a life of onerous rivalry, where not all can attain success, where the many work and suffer, where leisure and ease are limited to the few. The evidence for this is in the observations of the prevailing social analysts of that time — Edward Bellamy, Henry George, Karl Marx, and the varied Fabian socialists. None of these men were ever proven wrong, their criticisms are quite rational, but their solutions will lead to retrogression.

Due to the supposed law that individual reason is always in conflict with group flourishing, all 2300 or so years of moral philosophy are shown to have been fruitless:

The transforming fact which the scientific development of the nineteenth century has confronted us with is, that, as the interests of the social organism and of the individual are, and must remain, antagonistic, and the former must always be predominant, there can never be found any sanction in individual reason for conduct in societies where the conditions of progress prevail. One of the first results of the application of the methods and conclusions of the biological science of our time to social phenomena must apparently be to bring to a close that long-drawn-out stage of thought in which for 2300 years the human mind has engaged in a task, the accomplishment of which fundamental organic conditions of life render inherently impossible.

Once more, universal suffrage, universal education, the rule of democracy, and modern socialism are the connected features of a vast orderly process of development unfolding itself according to law. All of this undergirded, supposedly, by Christian asceticism, whose "spirit of utter self-abnegation was destined to find its significant social expression only at a later stage." For many centuries, almost every form of intellectual activity was ceded, until the Renaissance. But Christianity was an evolutionary driver, because:

The Christian religion possessed from the outset two characteristics destined to render it an evolutionary force of the first magnitude. The first was the extraordinary strength of the ultra-rational sanction it provided, which was developed throughout the long period we have been considering. The second was the nature of the ethical system associated with it, which, as we shall see, was at a later stage in suitable conditions calculated to raise the peoples coming under its influence to the highest state of social efficiency ever attained, and to equip them with most exceptional advantages in the struggle for existence with other peoples.

The ethical system in question being the typical cliché of the "universal brotherhood of man," which first required the strangling of the institutional power of the Church to be fully realized.

In his caricature of pre-democratic military caste societies, progress was impeded by "the most ruthless centralization, the most direct and impoverishing exploitation, and the most unbridled individual and class aggrandisement at the expense of immense oppressed populations, largely comprised of slaves."

Hence, the political history of the past few centuries and the nature of progress along with it, may be summarized as "the story of the political and the social enfranchisement of the masses of the people hitherto universally excluded from *participation in the rivalry of existence on terms of equality*."

In Kidd's own day, he perceived the two political parties of his day as converging on the ideal of a social state without protected power-holding classes and without disinherited and disenfranchised masses; that all would be secured by legislation the right to be admitted in the rivalry of life, as far as possible, on a footing of equality of opportunity. Liberal meritocracy had emerged from the survival of the fittest.

He calls it a "cosmic process," and states that its significance lies in obtaining the fullest, highest and completest expression of the struggle for existence in the history of the human race.

Or, as he wraps it up:

It may be perceived, in short, that the characteristic process of development, which is carrying us so far away from that social type which reached its highest expression in the ancient civilisations, is only another phase of that process already noticed, which has been throughout history gradually shifting the seat of power northwards into regions where the struggle for existence is severest. In the process of social expansion which the Western races are undergoing, they are being worked up to a high state of efficiency in the rivalry of life. The resulting energy, activity, vigour, and enterprise of the peoples most deeply affected by this process has given them the commanding place they have come to occupy in the world. It is in the extent to which it has contributed to further this development and to increase the stress of life that we must recognise the significance of that broadening down throughout the centuries of individual liberty, observable alike in our laws, our political institutions, and our social and domestic relations. It is as an aspect of this development that we must regard the importance of that progress towards economic freedom, which political economists are coming to look upon as characteristic of modern times. And it is as a necessary accompaniment of the same development that we must recognise the significance of that movement which, having at length almost completed the political enfranchisement of the masses, has in our own day, amid much misconception and misapprehension, already begun their social emancipation.

Individual reason and self-interest aside, Kidd sees the trend of social evolution as being characterized by a sharp rise in humanitarian feelings and a concomitant decline in patriotism. The prime evidence? The chirpings of the press, the rise of the animal rights movement, vegetarianism, etc.

Demilitarization is the root of social progress, along with the maxim that “there shall be no privileged class.” Abolitionism is closely related, as without such a movement “we should still be living in a world with the fetters of militancy hopelessly riveted on us.”

Now in contrast to Kidd’s stance on socialism as being counter-evolutionary, the advent of progressive legislation and the alleged rise in public-mindedness and humanitarianism among the elites is seen as a most positive development. Public opinion is anthropomorphized: “The public mind has become so intolerant of the sight of misery or wrong of any kind that, as the conditions of the life of the excluded masses of the people are gradually brought under discussion and come into the light, this feeling of intolerance slowly gathers force, until at last it finds expression in that powerful body of opinion or sentiment which has been behind all the great social and political reforms of our time.”

He goes as far as to describe it as “light being let in on the *dark foundations of our social system*.”

The softening of character, the deepening of altruistic feelings, the ever-growing sense of responsibility (?) — all of this is a pro-evolutionary path to socialism, integrating the great masses into the struggle for life on an unbridled footing.

The most important and characteristic movement, Kidd says, is the “revolt of labor,” the working class movement. Their rise is the result of the growth of the “altruistic fund,” and not so much the direct economic and technological changes.

Just so we don’t become too sappy, he reminds us that at the end of the day “if there can be no progress except by the accumulation of congenital variations above the average to the exclusion of others below; if, without the constant stress of selection which this involves, the tendency of every higher form of life will actually retrograde; then is the whole human race caught in the toils of that struggle and rivalry of life which has been in progress from the beginning. Then must the rivalry of existence continue, humanised as to conditions it may be, but immutable and inevitable to the end.”

So the colonial adventurer and the social worker are harmoniously reconciled: I give you war, death, pain and struggle, but I do my best to humanize it as possible with progressive legislation and the “altruistic fund” of public opinion and think tanks.

It is in Chapter VIII that Kidd mentions the transition of the Liberal Party (“the great political party which has led the van of progress during the past one hundred and fifty years”) from laissez-faire to social liberalism, a great revolution that he defends as fully consonant with the principles of liberalism, having “kept the faith” and not betrayed it, as social conditions have changed with greater enfranchisement. Marx was wrong to place economic factors at the forefront and discount psychological motives, as per Kidd, “never in human history have the minds of men been moved with nobler or more generous ideas towards each other.”

Summarizing the course of human evolution, we are given the following:

The tendency amongst all the advanced peoples appears to be unmistakable. It is everywhere to allow the fullest possible scope for the development of the personality of the individual, and the widest possible range of opportunity to follow wherever his powers or abilities lead him. We have, in a preceding chapter, dwelt upon the extent to which this tendency is displayed in almost every department of life amongst the leading Western peoples, and how unmistakably it constitutes the characteristic feature of the life of those sections of the race which are obtaining the greatest ascendancy in the world.

If we endeavour to present clearly to our minds the nature of this process as a whole, we shall find that we are now in a position to understand the meaning of that social development towards which our times are ripening, and with which the history of the twentieth century will undoubtedly be filled. Nay, more, we are enabled to distinguish, with some degree of clearness, the stages through which it must carry us in the immediate future. The period through which we are passing is perceived to be one of transition. A definite, long, drawn out and altogether remarkable era in the history of our civilisation is coming to a close amongst the more advanced peoples. We are entering on a new era. The political enfranchisement of the masses is well-nigh accomplished ; the process which will occupy the next period will be that of their social enfranchisement. The people have been, at last, admitted to equal political rights; in the next stage they must apparently be admitted to equal social opportunities. When the nature of the transition is perceived, it becomes clear also that the questions around which the conflict of social forces must centre in the immediate future are just those questions the socialist movement has brought into such prominence, namely, those affecting the existing rights of capital and the present distribution of wealth.

Finally, in his concluding remarks, Kidd reveals the swindle for what it was all along. He had not come to destroy utilitarianism, but to put lipstick on it: “The forces which are at work in the evolution of society are *certainly, on the whole, working out the greatest good of the greatest number in a progressive community*. But the earlier utilitarian conception of the greatest number has always related merely to the majority of the existing members of society at any time. The greatest good which the evolutionary forces, operating in society, are working at, is the good of the social organism as a whole. The greatest number in this sense is comprised of the members of generations yet unborn or unthought of to whose interests the existing individuals are absolutely indifferent and, in the process of social evolution which the race is undergoing, it is these latter interests which are always in the ascendant.”

So it is with the hokum of *Social Evolution*.

And yet, as forgotten and seemingly outdated as it is, it still has the capacity of feeling fresh. Such melioristic Social Darwinism served its purpose up until Harold Macmillan's "wind of change," and we may say that the rivalry for existence has only gotten intenser, as more and more people are being recruited into the struggle on basis of equal opportunity, indeed affirmatively equal.

If Darwinism once more grips the imagination of the elites, we may expect it will be the self-serving, pigheadedly triumphant social evolutionism of a Benjamin Kidd. For any biological argument favoring conservatism, several more just as convincing can be made for liberalism. "Evolutionary conservatism" is an oxymoron. The selection-driven accumulation of congenital variations cannot be the foundational, first-principles basis of anything, but merely a moving target for enterprising rebels to read their tarot cards the way they want to.

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7 thoughts on "Benjamin Kidd and the decline of left-wing Social Darwinism"

1. [Senghendrake](#) says:

[August 20, 2018 at 9:24 pm](#)

Dr

[Reply](#)

◦ [Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur](#) says:

[August 21, 2018 at 2:25 pm](#)

Fascinating.

[Reply](#)

2. Yaakov says:

[October 18, 2021 at 11:20 pm](#)

"Benjamin Kidd was a drunk paddy mick and civil service brat who made a good name for himself in the 1890s... For a long time, mainstream historiography typecast him as a Social Darwinist racist-capitalist-imperialist bogeyman, but in reality he was much worse than that — a smug, derivative and overinflated apostle of New Liberalism, bringing the people's budget and family planning at home, with the white man's burden exported abroad."

HaHaHaHa, nice!

"Utilitarianism cloaked with a veneer of thrill, adventure and the struggle for existence"

There's a lot of that even on the so-called "Right".

"...that he has reconciled the battle between science and religion (which is a false premise he uncritically accepts)..."

Correct! The notion of the secular as a trans-historical & trans-cultural feature of human existence is also a false premise. It would be nice if you would write about that!

“...by granting that sure, religion is nonsense, but it’s nonsense that made us great...”

There’s certainly a lot of that in so-called “Traditionalist”, “Dissident/Alt Right”, “Reactionary”, etc circles and whatever other nonsense that gets inappropriately called “Right Wing”.

“Not a very compelling or even novel theory, but it was still different from militant anthropocentric secularisms and theories about all religions as outgrowths of primitive ancestor cults that were then widely in vogue.”

And are unfortunately still very much in vogue. Waiting for that to finally die.

“So the colonial adventurer and the social worker are harmoniously reconciled: I give you war, death, pain and struggle, but I do my best to humanize it as possible with progressive legislation and the ‘altruistic fund’ of public opinion and think tanks.”

Hahaha, the West still carries on that tradition in a certain manner.

“He had not come to destroy utilitarianism, but to put lipstick on it.”

Ha, that’s a significant part of post Enlightenment Western thought. Different assertions of what might produce some kind of ultimate “utility”. In the language of the despised ones, it’s that for much of humanity there is “utility” or “pleasure”. Never the inherent.

“‘Evolutionary conservatism’ is an oxymoron.”

Tell that to your friends that like to have you on their programs and seem to follow you.

“The selection-driven accumulation of congenital variations cannot be the foundational, first-principles basis of anything, but merely a moving target for enterprising rebels to read their tarot cards the way they want to.”

Yes!!! Post Enlightenment Western thought is a joke! “Secular” mythos particularly so!

For someone with a somewhat decent understanding of certain historical periods, and wrote the above, why the altar to Karl Ludwig von Haller or any of the “conservatives from before the Franco-Prussian War”?

The absurdity that is “modernity” didn’t come from nowhere!

Also, you seem to like to reference my people from time to time (although always the unfortunately more assimilated elements). What’s the deal with that?

May I ask what ethnic group/people/tribe (whatever is the best way to convey that in modern English) you belong to? I have an assumption.

Is there a way to communicate with you aside from social media platforms? I don’t have that stuff. I have some questions for you.

I very much appreciate certain aspects of your blog and other material.

One criticism I do have is your obvious ignorance of my people, but you probably only know from us from sources based in Western perspectives and have contact with assimilated elements. I'm assuming you aren't fluent in any of our languages to be able to access our own source material.

Reply.

o Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur says:

October 19, 2021 at 6:07 am

> Is there a way to communicate with you aside from social media platforms? I don't have that stuff.

I've sent you an email to the address linked to your profile.

Reply.

3. Yaakov says:

October 21, 2021 at 4:58 pm

May I ask why no direct response to what I specifically sent to you via email?

The indirect response was rather weak! (Like your grasp of history & knowledge of my people.) It certainly didn't address any of my specific points.

Reply.

o Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur says:

October 21, 2021 at 7:12 pm

You went from sending me in-depth questionnaires to insulting me in the span of less than a day. I'll get to your questions, no worries.

Reply.

4. Yaakov says:

October 21, 2021 at 7:48 pm

Much appreciated!

If you could kindly keep the response to email! (That process would be more efficient for me).

Regarding your feeling insulted, you certainly don't seem able to "take" what you so effortlessly "dish"!

If those questions are regarding as "in-depth" by you, it appears you certainly understand very little about my people! (However, your little art project already made that abundantly clear!)

Looking forward! Be well!

Reply.

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