'Social Fitness' and the Idea of 'Survival' *

The external aspect of 'social fitness', that is: an intellectual evaluation of societies in terms of their fitness or otherwise to adapt and endure, derives most recently from evolutionist ideas of the nineteenth century. The idea has long vanished from social anthropology in that form. The early evolutionists were concerned with a particular solution of a problem that is of much longer standing, -part of a very general tendency of human beings to bring a moral evaluation to the condition of their social fabric. Long before Darwin there were centuries of European and near Eastern historical evidence available for reflection on this subject. The facts of conquest, destruction, dispersal, and absorption of certain societies by others provided the oldest basic material of human history - a seemingly endless series of tragedies for those directly involved with implications that were supremely depressing. The conditions under which polities survived or failed to survive were of genuine, even urgent, interest.

The Victorian evolutionists, in asserting that it is the 'best' (in some sense) that survives thus added a special optimistic nuance to what had formerly been a more pragmatic accommodation with necessity.

It was a commonplace of historical study, for example, that much that was meritorious was destroyed that Rome might survive; the idea that its 'peace' was a kind of 'wilderness' goes, of course, back to its own early imperial days (Tacitus). In the middle ages the idea of the destroyed beauty now included Rome itself. The trajectories of several of the successor states (Goths, Vandals, Byzantium) merely confirmed that the survival of social entities could not be guaranteed. The ages before the evolutionists had therefore inevitably had to come to terms with the matter. It is important to note then that nothing as simple as a vulgar 'might is right' was then accepted as a moral axiom. For many centuries of mediaeval time there was no doubt in the minds of many thinkers that there had been an unfortunate decline in most qualities of civilization despite important religious gains. The fact that Rome or classical civilization had not survived was not endowed with the particular metaphysics of survival that we now know. History in such cases seemed rather to confirm the mythological theme of the 'Golden Age'. It was a feature of Golden Ages that men became unfit to live in them, not that Golden Ages were unfit to survive. The idea of the Renaissance was thus of great significance later. It was explicitly so called because the classical age had been re-born; men had become fit to restore it.

It is interesting that it is in the eighteenth century that the notion of the Classical civilisation having died from a failure of and in itself, became finally fixed in English letters as an ambiguous result of Gibbon's Decline and Fall. That work still set out to show that men in some way had not been fitted for the Roman Empire. Yet its weight of scholarship conveyed the simultaneous conclusion that those same faulty men had been produced by the Roman Empire. Gibbon's masterpiece is, in my opinion, an essential literary precursor (placed as it was in every scholar's library) to the geologically, archaeologically and zoologically based social evolutionism of the next century. For although his work was truly about the

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failures of human beings, Gibbon himself . produced the cautious assessment that by the late 18th century, the modern system in which he lived had despite its faults not yet to face its own fall. The next century was characteristically less cautious.

The raising of the fact of survival to a measure of fitness in itself, arose in the nineteenth century through a sort of undistributed historical middle. The nineteenth century was assessed to have surpassed the past, by the past's own very best criteria. The course that had led to nineteenth century excellence was retraced back through history - criteria of future promise (not unlike the child Harold Wilson standing outside 10 Downing Street) were selected from the post-classical remains. Contemporary societies were evaluated in the same way: generally as inferior or 'primitive', their 'survival' being related to fitness for certain historical conditions only. This is all familiar enough from nineteenth century social anthropology, which was merely of its age in this respect.

But the problem of fitness as applied to societies was continued unconsciously into the twentieth century, ironically, by that most anti-evolutionist school of social anthropologists - the functionalists. Their demonstration of the internal coherence of social institutions in non-Western societies came in the end to lie very close to the simple view: 'if it is there it has a function'. Although the matter of extancy ('is it there?') was at an important level separated from the question of survival, the 'function' of 'function', in Malinowski's and Gluckman's writings at least, seems to be to maintain the society in being. In this surprising sense functionalism was a last triumph of the evolutionary approach, even as it turned it on its head. It demonstrated, in effect, that 'fitness' redefined as 'function' was not a feature of western societies alone. (This was a source of fruitful and corrective relativism in the best work of the period.) From there the further step to the hyper-relativism which alarmingly removes the word 'alone' from that sentence, was a short one, quickly taken by many of todays ecologists. That is: that western societies may, on a long view, be less 'fit' than 'simpler' smaller ones.

It is still possible to hear the assertion that for humanity evolution has moved from biology to society. The admission of society into the picture is, however, to produce the possibility of a self-evaluation. There is an internal aspect to the idea of social fitness. For the Victorian, the external and internal aspects - his view of 'biology' and of himself - were able to coincide. 'The fittest survive: fortunately (or as it happens), I am the fittest'. Result: happiness. For the 20th century ecologist, it is perhaps rather: 'The fittest survive: although (for my part) I do not feel very fit!. Result: consternation. This is a fault in logic before it is a fault in life. We are not entirely like science-fiction computers to be outwitted by a paradox and made to self-destruct. The nature of survival must be removed to its pre-nineteenth century position. Any definition of fitness in terms of survival renders the term fitness otiose, for fitness is thus only a property of having survived.

Murdock in this passage thus speaks with the voice of another age:

> 'By and large, the cultural elements that are eliminated through trial and error or social competition are the less adaptive ones, so that the process is as definitely one of the survival of the fittest as is that of natural selection' (1965: 126; original published in 1956).

And in particular:

> 'What man has lost, in the main, is a mass of maladaptive and barbarous practices, inefficient techniques, and outworn superstitions'. (Ibid: 127).

The modern redefinition of survival as 'adaptive continuity' raises equally difficult questions where society is concerned. With a broad enough definition, adaptation is historically demonstrable through almost any circumstances. Adaptation may follow adaptation, as it were, until a generation suddenly asks (we must imagine) 'Whatever happened to the Roman Empire?'. At some time an evaluation is made that a human entity has not survived - it was with us when we set out but it is no longer to be seen. A kind of objectification has retrospectively occurred. The fitness of a social form cannot be assessed as if it were an organism, because of this arbitrariness inherent in the social. Thus, traditionally, it is stated that the House of Commons has 'survived by adaptation' for seven centuries, the monarchy for ten or more. In contrast, although the American Presidency by external criteria may continue more features of eighteenth century monarchy than does the present British monarchy, the criterion of evaluation that 'the monarchy survives in the United States' is not open to us.

No progress can be expected in this matter until it is accepted that social entities are self-defining systems. Some transformations that are logically possible are defined out of actual experience. Possibly in a certain case only one definitional criterion must remain unchanged to demonstrate adaptive continuity. Frequently this may be only a 'name'. Perhaps in another case there are so many detailed criteria that no significant redefinition is possible. As an example, the Socialist Party of Great Britain, we learn from a recent study, once had a meeting that expelled dissenters by a majority vote. The meeting then voted to expel those who had voted against that motion. It then voted on the expulsion of those who had voted against that. The SPGB has been at times on the brink of biological extinction: a bus-crash or an influenza epidemic might have extinguished the party. The present gathering might have been likely to favour and to stress the ultimate biological explanation had such a tragedy occurred. But in terms of biology the ex-members of the SPGB, like those of the Communist Party, might well be legion. But for the history of the Party, what would have been their survival if the SPGB had not survived? (1)

We may make some helpful comments of a sort. A social entity survives ('in name') then if it does not maintain too many (how many?) self-defining criteria. In that sense then fitness has a marginal place even in modern social anthropology. We may imagine that if an SPGB-like entity were in charge of some critical task like maintaining irrigation, the craft might well be accidentally extinguished, to the detriment of a larger dependent population. Perhaps then we may say that a society's survival is related to the criteria of definition of some critically important unit. Priesthoods in charge of 'knowledge' provide possible examples. The Egyptian priesthood was perhaps more critically balanced in this respect than were the European monasteries (or than are modern universities?). Elsewhere it is argued that criteria of recruitment are the only demonstrable link between evolution and society, with only ambiguous implications for 'social fitness' (Ardener 1974).

We begin to see that the social evaluation of fitness does not make a clear distinction between the social and the biological. High rates of

gestatory difficulties among Bakweri women (Ardener 1961) were certainly in part due to the social definition as 'fertility medicines and treatments' of substances (purgatives) and procedures (enemas) of an abortifacient tendency. The social definition of biologically detrimental substances as beneficial is the oldest problem in preventative medicine.

The internal aspect of social fitness thus comes to our notice. Among several peoples the social is itself felt to be potentially healthy, or unhealthy. Places 'spoil', become bad. Witches become more virulent in bad places. Among sailors, bad ships are accident-prone as well as socially divided. The internal aspect of the idea of 'social fitness' still closely resembles the 'external aspect' we associate with the scholarly tradition whereby societies are evaluated for their historical success or failure. The scholarly version turns out to be merely part of that general tendency to externalisation common to modern thought. The recognition of the inherent entropy in human structures as not necessarily 'progressive' is, however, both very new and very old among observers of the human.

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Note

(1) See Barltrop, 1975: 48-50. This interesting case ran as follows. In 1914 a member of the Peckham branch, Mr. Wren, violated the SPGB's 'Hostility Clause' by signing a petition to a Liberal M.P. On orders from Executive Committee (EC) the Branch expelled Wren by 14 to 7. The minority of 7 were then expelled (by a poll of all party members) by 103 to 27. The 27 were then pursued. Ten members voted against the final expulsion and EC demanded that these also should be expelled, but branch secretaries and members were becoming elusive and the matter petered out in 1917.

Barltrop asks (p.190) 'What is there to be said for persistent membership of a small party whose electoral returns are absurdly small, whose influence is restricted; and which will not change its mind? Above everything else the SPGB remains the only custodian of the vision of socialism'.

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