

## Relativism and Darwinism Comments to Rotkirch & Roos

Steve Fuller

**I have never regarded myself as a relativist in the sense Rotkirch and Roos decry in their recent article (*Tieteessä tapahtuu* 2/2006). Rather, I am a 'meta-relativist' – that is, someone who believes that relativism itself needs to be treated relativistically, not as a universal doctrine. In that more limited sense, relativism is vital for understanding the specific social factors that promote and inhibit various points-of-view. But my ultimate aim is to identify intellectual positions that deserve to be carried forward beyond the contexts that originally sustain them. This process does not happen 'naturally' but by the active intervention of scientists and other intellectuals who serve to sharpen the distinction between what the positivists used to call the contexts of discovery and justification.**

After all, Darwinism became part of the first scientific research programme in biology only once it was detached from the original associations that Darwin himself – not only Herbert Spencer – made between natural selection and laissez faire political economy. This 're-contextualisation' of Darwinism occurred in the 1920s–1940s by experimental geneticists who believed that the 'hand' of natural selection was not so 'invisible' that it could not be reproduced in the laboratory. Many of these geneticists have been Christians who believed that such early successes in 'biotechnology' testified to their having gained significant access to the divine plan. This is even true today: The head of the US National Institute of Health's Human Genome Project, Francis Collins, is a born-again Christian with muted views on evolution. To be sure, the divine plan appears to be statistical rather than deterministic – but it is much more 'intelligent' than the rhetoric of 'blind chance' of Darwinism's popular supporters.

But why resurrect the Christian origins of genetics today? Basically, to serve as a counterweight to Darwinism's egalitarian attitude toward all forms

of life, a position with potentially disastrous implications for humans. The main precedent is the emergence of 'racial hygiene' as the application of Darwinism to medicine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which earned its founder, Alfred Ploetz, a nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1936. These Darwinists treated diseases as the means by which fit from unfit humans were naturally selected. They believed that diseases should therefore run their normal course without such 'counter-selection' interventions as vaccinations that only keep people alive 'artificially' at the expense of the rest of nature. Contemporary deep ecologists and animal rights activists may be seen as descendants of this orientation, which became discredited under the Nazis. Nevertheless, the racial hygienists asked a reasonable question: If you are a true Darwinist, why privilege the survival and proliferation of humans over other natural species? Our deep interest and support of medical science and biotechnology reflects a strong pre-Darwinian image of humans as potential creators and carers, very much like the God in whose image monotheists believe we were created.

It is ironic that Rotkirch and Roos should write as if relativism and Darwinism were opposed to each other, when in fact Darwinism may be seen as one of the most persuasive attempts to turn relativism into a universal doctrine – that is, to go beyond cross-cultural to cross-species equality. This is a lesson they should have learned from Finland's most distinguished contributor to social science, Edvard Westermarck, who held just such a combination of relativist and Darwinist views. I made this point at the Westermarck memorial lecture in 2002, and have since developed it in *The New Sociological Imagination* (Sage, 2006). Perhaps Rotkirch and Roos failed to see that I was speaking *against* Westermarck.

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