

**David Stack** is a lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Reading. He has previously taught at Queen Mary, University of London and Keele University, and has written widely on both the history of the left and popular science in the nineteenth century. His first book, *Nature and Artifice: The life and thought of Thomas Hodgskin, 1787–1869*, was published by the Royal Historical Society in 1998 and he is currently writing a biography of the nineteenth-century Scottish phrenologist George Combe.

Darwinism and socialism were the two most exciting ideas of the late nineteenth century. One tore down a model of nature that was static and unchanging; the other sought to do the same for society. Almost inevitably the ideas of Darwinism and socialism became intertwined in the period from 1859 to 1914. The modern socialist movement was a product of the Darwinian age and most leading socialists of the period had studied and accepted Darwinism before reaching their political maturity. This was true of socialists both in Britain and beyond – including Annie Besant, Ramsay MacDonald, Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, Jack London and Prince Peter Kropotkin. Each inevitably carried something of their Darwinism over into their understanding of socialism. In this study of the relationship between the two ideas, David Stack argues that the contribution of Darwinism to the thought of the British left has been underestimated. Darwinism played a crucially important role both in the shift from radicalism to socialism that occurred in the late nineteenth century and in enabling MacDonald and others to develop a distinctive socialist position, marked off from liberalism to the right and Marxism to the left.

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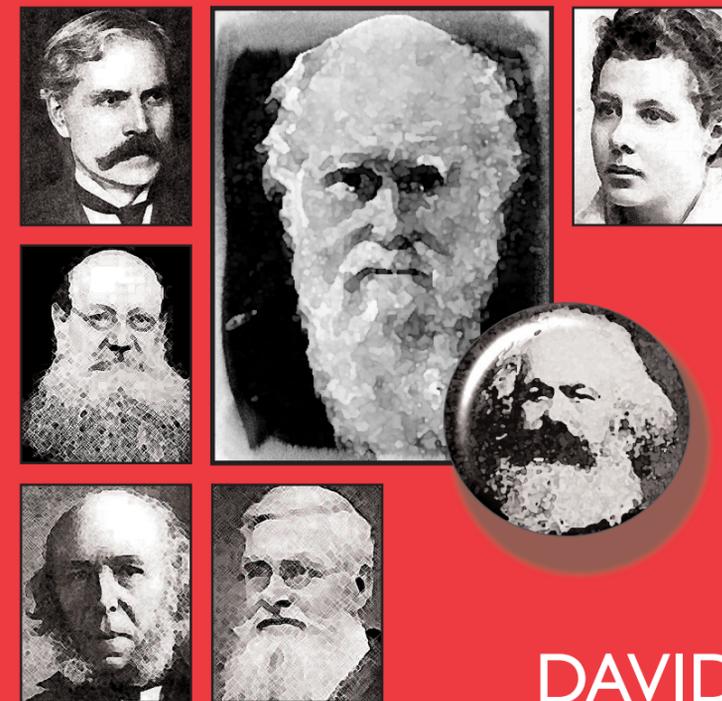


THE FIRST DARWINIAN LEFT  
SOCIALISM AND DARWINISM 1859–1914

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In this first study of the relationship between Darwinism and the left in Britain, David Stack argues that Darwinism provided the 'constitutive metaphor' within which modern socialism was developed. The organic and evolutionary language of Darwinism, it is shown, provided the discursive space in which the new ideology of socialism was probed, explored and developed in the period from 1859 through to 1914.

The relationship between socialism and Darwinism was not instrumental – with socialists simply picking and choosing convenient ideas to conform to their political prejudices – but isomorphic, involving a real cross-fertilization of ideas and concepts from the biological to the sociological and back again. This process was especially evident in writings of those socialists such as Alfred Russel Wallace, Emile Vandervelde and Prince Peter Kropotkin who were also accomplished scientists, but also helps us better appreciate the stance of amateur enthusiasts such as Annie Besant, Jack London and Ramsay MacDonald.

*The First Darwinian Left* demonstrates how the discursive boundaries imposed by Darwinism profoundly influenced the construction of socialist ideology in Britain: marking it off from the older radical tradition, as well as distinguishing it from liberalism on the right and Marxism on the left. In particular, the crucial role of Ramsay MacDonald in developing and disseminating a distinctively Darwinian understanding of socialism among the membership of the Independent Labour Party is analysed.