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Darwin and the Body Politic: Schäffle, Veblen, and the Shift of Biological Metaphor in Economics

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Analogy, which offers to many an author stimulus for occasional witty comparisons, becomes with writers of the sort referred to the axis upon which everything turns—Adam Smith

A long tradition of thought in Western political philosophy compares the body of man to the political body. Known as the “body politic,” this anthropomorphic rendering of the public sphere enforced the interdependence of individuals in society—the harmony of the human body mirroring the assumed natural harmony of humanity. This traditional cosmological frame of reference was, with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, overcome by the emergence of evolutionary social systems. Both theories had their roots in biology, although with different dynamics at fundamentally different levels of abstraction. While the old tradition used the metaphor of biology to catalogue the concrete equivalency of parts connecting the body to society, the new way of thinking abandoned this taxonomic exercise to conceptualize society in the same natural forces of selection and change as evolutionary biology. One was based on principles of harmony and normality, the other on disharmony and relativity. There was, however, as in the Kuhnian model of a paradigm-shift, a transitional period when Darwinian concepts were internalized in the pre-existing model of society.¹ Albert Schäffle [1831-1903] can fruitfully be considered the last major representative of the old trajectory of thought, and Thorstein Veblen [1853-1929] the first of the new. Both writers are characterized by a sociological approach to the economic sphere and were conscious outsiders to what now would be considered the mainstream of their field. By comparing and contrasting their uses of biological metaphors and the places these occupied in their larger visions of society and the economy, I will explore some of the tensions generated in late nineteenth century political philosophy by the dramatic change in biological paradigm—in other words by Darwin’s first encounter with the body politic.

The Body Politic in History

There exists by now a voluminous literature on how modern economics, following the “path of least mathematical resistance” under the yoke of its own “physics envy”, has come to consider the economic sphere as largely independent of larger social factors.² Yet, there also exists a much older tradition of thought envisioning the economy as irrevocably embedded in a

¹ Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 92-135, passim.

² Krugman, Paul R., *Geography and Trade*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT-Press, 1991, p. 6; Mirowski, Philip, *More Heat than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics as Nature’s Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

matrix of social, cultural, and scientific factors. Viewed in this way, economics emerges, in a direct series of filiations from Giovanni Botero through Friedrich List to Joseph Schumpeter, from the much maligned Renaissance notion of the Reason of State, a broad and pragmatic contextualized approach to human coexistence both material and political. A similar argument can be made for economic theory itself, as the methodology of the moment invariably reflects factors beyond mere instrumental efficiency: the choice of metaphors guiding and modulating the development of theory establishes a path dependency, as further research naturally comes to align itself with the possibilities offered by the metaphor rather than with observable phenomena. Or, alternatively, with data the theory fails to observe because of its metaphorical blinders.

While early modern political economists such as Gerard de Malynes [ca.1586-1623] seemingly drew their metaphors and analogies from the hermetic tradition of Paracelsian chemistry, the analysis of the socio-economic sphere was soon informed by metaphorical analogies from the sphere of Newtonian physics.³

Theoretical beliefs in harmony and equilibrium are only some symptoms of this larger scientific emulation, and the fact that physics has since moved on from a cosmology in equilibrium seems to have had rather little impact on the economics profession. For centuries before and after this metaphorical transition from chemistry to physics, however, the social sciences drew their analogies from biology, and more specifically from the anatomy of the human body.

Although the metaphorical connection between the human body and society occurred with a certain frequency in the Ancient Greek world, it was only systematized in Roman times. Drawing on this Greco-Roman heritage of imagery relating to the human body and society, Justinian's Digest formalized these scattered thoughts for renewed reception in European socio-political discourse at the birth of the High Middle Ages. The Digest was the central work in the codification of Roman law ordered by Justinian in the 6th century that came to be called the *Corpus iuris civilis* (Body of Civil Law) and came to influence, to lesser or greater extents, all Western legal systems (especially the so-called "civil law" systems of Europe, as in Germany)

³ Malynes first mentioned Paracelsus in his *England's View, in Unmasking of Two Paradoxes: With a replication unto the answer of Maister John Bodine*, London, 1603. Following a lengthy quotation he claims to have "read all the bookes of Paracelsus" that he "could find." Paracelsus is, however, given the most attention in *Consuetudo, Vel Lex Mercatoria, or The Ancient Law-Merchant. Divided into three Parts: According to the Essential Parts of Trafficke. Necessarye for all Statesmen, Judges Magistrates, Temporall and Civile Lawyers, Mint-men, Merchants, Marriners, and all others Negotiating in all Places of the World*. London, 1622, pp. 189, 255-259. For further discussion of Malynes' Paracelsianism, see Finkelstein, Andrea. *Harmony and the Balance: An Intellectual History of Seventeenth-Century English Economic Thought*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, pp. 26-53, *passim*. The infatuation of modern economics with metaphors drawn from the realm of physics is discussed in Mirowski, *More Heat than Light*.

and the Western tradition of political thought. The Digest is a compilation, organized by the *quaestor* Tribonian and a team of sixteen jurists, of the opinions of the classical jurists of Rome culled from more than 2000 volumes of legal commentary, and it includes a well-known discussion on the relationships between different bodies:

There are three kinds of *corpora*. The first is held together by a single spirit and is called *unitum*, such as a man, a tree, or a stone. The second consists of things joined together, that is, of many things cohering among themselves, which is called *connexum*, like a building, a ship, or a box. And the third consists of separated things, such as many whole bodies, but which are covered by one name, like a people, a legion, or a flock.⁴

The idea of state came to rely on the Digest's connection between the individual and collective bodies, and while the metaphorical connection of man and society thus rested on lingering Greco-Roman echoes, it was only with John of Salisbury's [ca. 1120-1180] *Policraticus* in the twelfth century that a full-scale anatomy of the anthropomorphic state was attempted.⁵ The head, heart, eyes, ears, tongue, and intestines of man all gain their equivalents in Salisbury's "body of the commonwealth."⁶ From the time of the *Policraticus*, the concept of the body politic became thoroughly embedded in European thought from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment.⁷ Its most celebrated manifestation can perhaps be found in Hobbes' *Leviathan*; from its impressive frontispiece showing the incarnation of the state literally formed from its citizens to its intricate taxonomy of man's ills and their respective counterparts in the commonwealth (i.e. separation and equality of spiritual power and temporal power being analogous to epilepsy, in which an "unnatural spirit, or wind in the head that obstructeth...the power of the Soule in the Brain"), the *Leviathan* is a crowning achievement of the body politic tradition.⁸

The image of the body politic was, however, not a phenomenon limited to the social sciences. To adopt the structuralist phraseology of Levi-Strauss for the occasion, it was a leitmotif that was translated into various media, finding its expression in art, sermons, and the various sciences. Foucault argued man

⁴ Justinian, *Digest*, 41.3.30.

⁵ Barkan, Leonard. *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975, p. 72.

⁶ John of Salisbury. *The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury; Being the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Books, and Selections from the Seventh and Eighth Books, of the Policraticus, Political Science Classics*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1927, p. 65.

⁷ Kantorowicz, Ernst Hartwig. *The King's Two Bodies; a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

⁸ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 227; Barkan, *Nature's Work of Art*, p. 114.

sought to explain the unknown through analogy with more familiar concepts, the body being the perfect “reservoir for models of visibility,” as it was the only thing that was readily “known, experienced, and controlled.”⁹ The analogy of the body indeed appears in the influential alchemical treatises of Paracelsus [1493-1541] as part of his larger insistence on a cosmological harmony between the microcosm of man and the macrocosm of the universe, and was particularly prevalent in economic theory throughout the Medieval period as a way to explain the unfathomable mechanisms of the universe. From saturating Western discourse, the man/society analogy gradually disappeared under the onslaught of the Newtonian paradigm and its associated theories of an infinite cosmology. The body of man, for all its poetic wonder, eventually proved too limiting a prison in which to encapsulate the ever-expanding universe, and was discarded as new methods of understanding emerged.¹⁰ The German body politic tradition did, however, for reasons we will now discuss, outlive its Anglo-Saxon counterpart.

Biology as Equivalence: Albert Schäffle and the Body Politic

As was typical of German economists of the time, Schäffle’s approach to his subject was far broader than that of the classical economists. Well versed in contemporary law and sociology, he wrote in a tradition still bound legally, as well as culturally, to the Greco-Roman legacy of jurisprudence codified by Justinian from which the German legal system stemmed.¹¹ This “organic” sociological system was described by Max Weber as an “attempt to understand social interaction by using as a point of departure the ‘whole’ within which the individual acts.” Schäffle’s work was, in Weber’s eyes, a “brilliant” example of the tradition.¹² While Schäffle was a voluminous writer, the most coherent statement of his socio-biological metaphorical programme was the 1875 *Bau und Leben des Soziale Körpers*—literally the *Structure and Life of the Social Body*. It was reissued in four volumes starting in 1881, and, while critically received by audiences across Europe, has only been translated into the Italian as part of Girolamo Boccardo’s *Biblioteca dell’Economista*, also in 1881.¹³ In many ways representing the apex of the body politic tradition, Schäffle’s work

⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge, 2002 p. 147, *passim*; Porter, Roy. ‘History of the Body Reconsidered’, in Peter Burke (ed.) *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p. 235.

¹⁰ Barkan. *Nature’s Work of Art*, p. 277.

¹¹ Forschungsunternehmen Neunzehntes Jahrhundert. 3 Arbeitskreis Rechtswissenschaft. Helmut Coing, and Walter Wilhelm. *Wissenschaft und Kodifikation des Privatrechts im 19. Jahrhundert, Studien zur Rechtswissenschaft des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts : Bd. 1*. Frankfurt (am Main): Klostermann, 1974.

¹² Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, Being Part I of Wirtschaft and Gesellschaft*. London: William Hodge and Company, 1947, p. 93.

¹³ It was, for example, reviewed in France by none other than Émile Durkheim. “Schaeffle, A. Bau und Leben des sozialen Koerpers: Erster Band.” *Revue philosophique* 19 (1885), p. 84-101.

was a final attempt to internalize elements of the newly emerging Darwinian paradigm into the old: "Darwin wrote on the physiognomy of the individual", he affirmed, but "the physiognomy of society is no less worthy of study."¹⁴ His voluminous attempt at reconciliation between metaphors had a considerable influence on the consequent socioeconomic discourse,¹⁵ and was "fortunately," Schumpeter dryly noted, "not entirely spoilt by its author's attempts to discover in the social body nerves and digestive organs."¹⁶

Schäffle seems to summon Justinian's third category of *corpus* in his description of the body politic—it differs from the individual in degree, rather than in kind: "the psychical life of the social body is a higher potency of the psychical life of the individual."¹⁷ It is a higher form of the same energy, the essence of the microcosm, as in the much earlier Paracelsian cosmology, perfectly projected onto the larger canvas of the macrocosm. This qualitative amplification of energy results in a corresponding amplification of typologies, and the physiography of the microcosm could, in the logic of the tradition, thus be aggregated onto the macrocosm.

The Anatomy of Schäffle's Body Politic

Society, Schäffle therefore proclaims, is made of the same ideal tissues as man. Five "social tissues" form Schäffle's body politic, corresponding to the osseous (i.e. the bones), tegumentary (i.e. the skin), vascular (i.e. the vessels carrying fluids), muscular, and nervous organic tissues of the biological body respectively. They are the locative (i.e. the material, connecting the body politic to the soil), the protective, commercial, administrative, and psycho-spiritual.¹⁸ Whereas many of Schäffle's biological metaphors were inspired by the earlier work of Paul von Lilienfeld [1829-1903], their basic social units differed considerably. Whereas Lilienfeld affirmed the individual human being was the social counterpart of the biological cell, Schäffle affirmed his sociological approach to economics by arguing "the family" to be "for the social body what the cell is for the organic body."¹⁹

¹⁴ Schäffle, Albert. *Bau und Leben des Soziale Körpers - Struttura e Vita del Corpo Sociale*. Translated by Eusebio Ludovico. Ed. Girolamo Boccardo. 2 vols. Vol. 1, *Biblioteca dell'Economista*. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1881 p. 345. All translations are my own.

¹⁵ Hart, Hornell. "The History of Social Thought: A Consensus of American Opinion", *Social Forces* 6, no. 2 (1927), p. 194; Hutter, Michael. "Organism as a Metaphor in German Economic Thought", in Philip Mirowski (ed.), *Natural Images in Economic Thought: Nature Read in Tooth and Claw*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 302

¹⁶ Schumpeter, Joseph Alois. *History of Economic Analysis*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 788

¹⁷ Schäffle, *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, p. 16; Thon, O. "The Present Status of Sociology in Germany, II", *American Journal of Sociology*, 2, no. 5 (1897), p. 726.

¹⁸ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, p. 35-64, 271-320; Thon, "The Present Status", p. 728.

¹⁹ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, p. 213; Cohen, I. Bernard. "Newton and the Social Sciences, with Special Reference to Economics, or, the Case of the Missing Paradigm", in Mirowski, *Natural Images in Economic Thought*, p. 81.

The first taxonomic category of Schäffle's anthropomorphic state is then the osseous frame of society, the infrastructure and material constructions connecting the body politic to the soil: "The great cities support, like a skeleton, the central nexus of spiritual and administrative power."²⁰ These "organs" were, however, naked to the dangers of the world without the second category of tissue, the "skin" of society. To fit Schäffle's sociological scheme, the political equivalent of the body's tegumentary tissue is not presented as a protective shell or casing (as one could forgive for expecting) but rather as a much more fluid and enmeshed phenomenon: "The protective tissues are diffused throughout the social body, but less like a coordinated system of tissue than as an ingredient of other tissues in exposed places." From social institutions to military personnel, the "skin of society" encapsulates the protection of society from internal, as well as external antagonists—concrete and abstract.²¹

The third tissue identified by Schäffle is less exotic, and indeed a leitmotif of sorts in the historiography of economic analysis stretching back to the time of the Church Fathers. The symbolic connection between the circulation of blood and trade has been a theme of socioeconomic thought for centuries, if not millennia, and summoned the image of the body politic even in works generally independent of that tradition. Ferdinando Galiani, the celebrated eighteenth century Neapolitan diplomat and political economist, and a favourite of nineteenth-century German economic discourse, is emblematic of this:

Poor circulation ruins agriculture and the arts. In the body politic, as in the human body, large veins serve for nothing but to carry blood to final or smaller veins. This is how new flesh and, sometimes, new limbs are generated and how nutrition for the whole engine is provided.²²

Schäffle's circulation builds on this idea by envisioning trade as the blood of the social body, nourishing the entire matrix of social tissues, but goes well beyond it by cataloguing the political equivalents of a variety of other bodily fluids. His discussion of circulation was in many ways the most acute dissection of the body politic in the *Bau und Leben*, and certainly the part where the metaphor of the body politic was employed to explain the greatest number of economic phenomena. The entire human digestive system from the intake of food and oxygen through the "internal metamorphosis" to the eventual excretion of wastes was transplanted onto the social level in homage of the body politic, and it is here, if anywhere, that Schäffle was,

²⁰ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, p. 271.

²¹ Schäffle, *Bau und Leben*, p. 275.

²² Galiani, Ferdinando. *Della Moneta*. Bari: G. Laterza & figli, 1751/1915 p. 233.

as the great sociologist Albion Small put it, lost in “a mist of far-fetched analogies.”²³ The digestive system of the body politic, for example, was represented by the productive capacity of industry, and one can only imagine the manufacturing equivalents of ulcers, tumours, and tapeworms.

Schäffle’s administrative tissue was similarly a multifaceted phenomenon. Part thought, part power, it is the locus of agency and action for the body politic: “it covers the forces of labor, execution, activation, and control, as well as the material apparatus of the nation.”²⁴ Like the muscles of the human body, the administrative tissue brings the plans of the body politic to bear. Directed by society’s psycho-spiritual nerves, fuelled by its commerce and productive capacity, located in its cities, and defended by its protective institutions, the administrative tissue is the locomotive nexus of Schäffle’s body politic.²⁵ The quintessence of the entire system, however, permeated its nerves.

Much like its protective skin, the psycho-spiritual nerves of society were, in Schäffle’s model, mystically embedded in every membrane of the body politic. They are the aggregate of popular opinion and the manifestation of the nation’s *Geist*,²⁶ Schäffle distinguished between three categories of psycho-spiritual power: the “active personal elements, namely the spiritual labouring forces,” such as parliaments, councils, and churches, the “symbolic elements,” such as music, language, interests, and habits, and finally the “technical and economic institutions” that provide the psycho-spiritual nerves of society with its fuel—churches, museums, libraries.²⁷

Schäffle, Darwin, and the *Kathedersozialisten*

So far, Schäffle’s body politic was qualitatively very similar to those produced by John of Salisbury and Thomas Hobbes—Society was carefully dissected and its parts laboriously compared to the organic equivalence of best match. Schäffle’s body politic was, however, fundamentally different in that it was imbued with direction. Whereas earlier theorists of the body politic generally envisioned a perfect, harmonious body in stasis—an unfolded utopia one may say, Schäffle’s society was fundamentally changing and dynamic, although still harmonious in its teleological evolution. The difference between these static and dynamic conceptions of reality can, much like the body politic itself, be traced back to Ancient Greece: Pre-Darwinian social theorists, a category which does not exclude much that passes for

²³ Small, Albion W. “Some Contributions to the History of Sociology, Section xvii. The Attempt (1860-80) to Reconstruct Economic Theory on a Sociological Basis”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 30, no. 2 (1924), p. 186

²⁴ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, p. 287.

²⁵ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, p. 289.

²⁶ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, p. 293.

²⁷ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, pp. 292-317.

economics and social science, follow Zeno's belief in a reality at once static and dynamic, whereas post-Darwinian evolutionists adhere to the qualitatively changing world of Heraclitus. Karl Popper put the semantic paradox resulting from this dichotomy well:

For the kind of society which the sociologists call 'static' is precisely analogous to those physical systems which the physicists would call 'dynamic' (although stationary)²⁸

Newtonian physics would consider the solar system 'dynamic', insofar as it contains motion and change, whereas social scientists would call it 'static', since it, apart from rare celestial phenomena that also can be explained within the framework of the model, never undergoes structural change. There is no 'novelty', no 'innovation'. Schäffle included both in his body politic, albeit these innovations invariably were aligned with the eventual development of Schäffle's peculiar form of socialism.

It has been said that the science of biology found the same representative spirit in Charles Darwin that the exact natural sciences had found in Isaac Newton, and, like the latter, he forever changed the possible uses of biological metaphors in the social sciences.²⁹ It has indeed been argued that the migration of academic ideas in the second half of the nineteenth century predominantly was from biology to the emerging discipline of sociology and to the more established one of anthropology.³⁰ Being aware of these recent scientific developments, Schäffle understandably sought to align his socioeconomic model with the mood of the academic moment. He therefore emphasised the "goal-setting interworking of a divine world substance" moved by the force of "adaptation" (*Anpassung*) mediating a "struggle for existence." Darwin's *Origin of Species*, it seems, had joined Hegel's *Philosophy of History* on the theoretical stage of the *Bau und Leben*. It has been noted that writers have a tendency to find in Darwin what they want,³¹ and it takes a very profound engagement with Darwinism to appreciate its full connotations. The teleology of Schäffle's providential socialism was therefore ironically allowed to operate in explicitly Darwinian terms, an instrumental use of the Origin to which many laymen and professionals still adhere: "Progressive social formation", Schäffle maintained, "is the highest result of the perfecting selections of the human struggle for existence."³²

²⁸ Popper, Karl Raimund. *The Poverty of Historicism*. 1957, pp.112-113.

²⁹ Sombart, Werner. "Sociology: What It Is and What It Ought to Be, an Outline for Neo-Sociology", *American Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 2 (1949), p. 181

³⁰ Gissis, Snait. "Late Nineteenth Century Lamarckism and French Sociology", *Perspectives on Science* 10, no. 1 (2002), p. 72.

³¹ Proctor, Robert N. *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 16.

³² Schäffle 1896 p. 55.

The paradox is that Schäffle relied on a Darwinian conception of causation—and particular the idea of natural selection—as active impulses selecting towards some specific pre-determined end station, rather than as an utterly passive force that could and would go anywhere. He internalizes parts of Darwin into his program, but never brought the Darwinian analogy to full bloom by embracing all of its connotations. Institutional economists have often argued that social evolution is part Lamarckian and part Darwinian because consecutive generations of society inherit habits and institutions as well as genetic templates. According to Lamarck, environmental factors influence organisms to meet the demands of their contexts; Lamarckian evolution is based on cumulative, hereditary acclimatizations, and thus a very different mechanism of change from Darwinian causality. Schäffle, however, went beyond the fusion of Darwin and Lamarck by imbuing the evolution of his body politic with a clearly defined teleological end.

Schäffle's chimera might have been compelling to some, but its seeming lack of practical value led one of his most ardent contemporary critics to ask the damning question: "of what good is all this?"³³ The point of the *Bau und Leben*, one could argue, was dependent on a larger vision of social reform. Schäffle can, on the basis of his historical and sociological approach to economics, be classified as a *Kathedersozialist*.³⁴ These so-called "socialists of the professorial chair" were, as Schumpeter so poetically put it, planning to "sail between the Scylla of liberalism and the Charybdis of communism."³⁵ Disenchanted with the excesses of both extremes, they sought a broad avenue of economic reform through the directed guidance of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, the political arm of the German Historical School.³⁶ The *Verein* was established to find answers to the most pertinent social question of the day, the *Soziale Frage* of why the rich got richer while the poor seemingly only became poorer. Schäffle too battled with this problem; Marxism presented an "impracticable programme," and "the Social Question," he argued, could therefore only be solved through "positive gradual reform."³⁷ In framing the process of attaining social perfection in terms of gradual changes, Schäffle is also in alignment with the *Kathedersozialist* agenda he helped codify. There was no use in following the Jacobins of the French Revolution in demanding an overnight transformation to solve all of humanity's problems, so instead a "fundamental

³³ Thon, "The Present Status of Sociology in Germany", p. 728

³⁴ Indeed, we find H.B. Oppenheim starts his book on the group with an analysis of Schäffle. Oppenheim, Heinrich Bernhard. *Der Kathedersozialismus*. Berlin, 1872.

³⁵ Schumpeter. *History of Economic Analysis*, p. 459.

³⁶ Philippovich, Eugen von. "The Verein für Sozialpolitik", *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 5, no 2 (1891), pp. 220-237.

³⁷ Schäffle. *Bau und Leben*, vol. I, pp. 120, 126-127.

reconstruction of society was to come about in time, as a by-product rather than as the result of efforts directly aimed at it.”³⁸

Acknowledging Engels’ terrible verdict of working class welfare under laissez-faire liberalism, but unwilling to accept the Marxist alternative of a proletariat dictatorship, the *Kathedersozialisten* were faced with the Herculean task of forming a coherent socio-political program defending the weaker elements of society against the forces of the newly liberated market.³⁹

Schäffle’s Darwinian Body Politic must be seen in the light of this larger goal. He was sure some sort of “socialism” would embody the Hegelian “end of history”, and by finding the equivalent of the ideal harmony of man in society through the biological metaphor of the body politic, he could direct his teleological progression of society towards the harmonious whole of a socialist state.

Schäffle’s use of the biological metaphor is thus a hybrid, a chimera of disparate parts. Woody Allen once described a mythical beast—the “Great Roe”—which had the head of a lion and the body of a lion, only not the same lion. Schäffle’s socioeconomic metaphor likewise had a head of biology and a body of biology, though from different biologies. Only with the work of the iconoclastic Norwegian-American economist Thorstein Veblen would economics fully come to embrace the implications of Darwin.

Biology as Process: Thorstein Veblen and the Birth of Darwinian Social Systems

Veblen, like Schäffle, was also the representative of a much broader tradition of economic inquiry—now referred to as Institutional Economics—than most of his contemporaries, and both their approaches to the economic sphere were deeply inflected by developments in the biological sciences. Unlike Schäffle, however, Veblen engaged with these developments, whether Darwinian or Lamarckian, and their resulting analogies, from a very different perspective and with profoundly different conclusions regarding the idea of social science itself. In Veblen, biology no longer provided the harmonious link between man and society, but was rather the provider of an abstract, conceptual framework of development, of evolution. Society, and thus the economy, evolved along non-teleological, context-dependent trajectories of change; i.e. it changed depending on its nature and nurture, its past and present, rather than in a gradual approach towards some ideal state of perfection. Whereas the old image of the body politic was based on the ideal harmony of a divinely inspired body—an idea Schäffle manifested in the eventual advent of a socialist utopia, Veblen’s evolutionary

³⁸ Schumpeter. *History of Economic Analysis*, p. 803.

³⁹ Engels, Friedrich. *Die Lage der Arbeitenden Klasse in England*. Leipzig, 1845; Ingram, John Kells. *A History of Political Economy*. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967, p. 205

cosmology could accept no ideal states, nor any harmonious equilibriums upon which to fall back.⁴⁰ Society could not progress along any predestined sequence of stages, because the contextual dimensions of change inevitably would vary from scenario to scenario—economic evolution was not, Veblen argued in his famous article “Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?”, “a narrative survey of phenomena”, but rather a “genetic account of an unfolding sequence.”⁴¹ Veblen sought to find the mechanisms of change where he felt earlier economists only had produced chronological lists of events.

The ideal template of divine man supplied the body politic tradition with a perfect union of microcosm and macrocosm that normatively explained how things “ought to be,” what the “end of history” would and should be like, and ultimately what man himself was all about. If man was perfect, his societal mirror image could clearly also achieve some sort of perfection, or normality. Veblen refuted this normative “animism” in science by attacking the notion that society was heading towards any arbitrarily decided “end.”⁴² The “ideal of conduct” present in the works of pre-evolutionary writers often came to serve as “a canon of truth” according to Veblen, and he was therefore also critical of the *Kathedersozialisten*. In his 1894 essay “The Army of the Commonwealth,” Veblen mentions the “Socialists of the Chair” as a movement submissive to “vicarious providence.”⁴³ The *Kathedersozialisten* were seen to engage in theoretical work around a very detailed agenda of reform, something which Veblen in their case found too contextual, too specific and dependent on the state to be of universal value. In the end, the German Historical School was too pre-Darwinian in its Hegelian philosophy of reform to properly contribute to Veblen’s evolutionary economics.

For Veblen, like Schäffle, had also used Darwin’s theories of adaptation to explain economic change in his works; unlike Schäffle’s, however, Veblen’s adaptation was not directed towards any specific end. “Economic action is teleological,” he affirmed, “in the sense that men always and everywhere seek to do something,” but his argument was for local, rather than universal determinism.⁴⁴ Man, according to Veblen, is neither teleologically driven towards a hedonistic individualist, nor socialist, end, but path-dependent towards whatever end his nature and nurture have instilled in him. These guiding habits are in turn subject to the vicissitudes of history, and are

⁴⁰ Nelson, Richard R., and Sidney G. Winter. *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1982

⁴¹ Veblen, Thorstein. “Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 12, no. 4 (1898), p. 375

⁴² Veblen, “Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?”, p. 379

⁴³ Veblen. “The Army of the Commonwealth”, in *idem. Essays in Our Changing Order*. New York: Viking, 1894/1949, pp. 102-103

⁴⁴ Veblen. “Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?”, p. 391.

indeed Lamarckian in the sense that cumulative changes result from cultural inheritance and institutional transmission, rather than strictly genetic Darwinian mutation.⁴⁵

The products of his hereditary traits and his past experiences, cumulatively wrought out under a given body of traditions, conventionalities, and material circumstances; and they afford a point of departure for the next step in the process.⁴⁶

Veblen was here influenced by C. Lloyd Morgan's idea that evolution had been transferred from the level of the organism to that of the environment.⁴⁷ This theory postulated that, while the faculty of the "race" was at a standstill, their ceremonial achievements evolved "by leaps and bounds."⁴⁸ Veblen thus argued that while "the typical endowment of instincts" had been stable since the era of the last Ice Age, "the habitual elements of human life" changed "unremittingly and cumulatively, resulting in a continued proliferous growth of institutions."⁴⁹ Again, the maligned Lamarckian spectre haunts Veblen's writings, and one cannot understand his evolutionary approach to social sciences without synthesizing Lamarck and Darwin. While humanity evolved through Darwinian natural selection, society evolved, on the basis of this, through the inheritance of acquired characteristics.⁵⁰ Lamarck, in this sense, took over from Darwin where C. Lloyd Morgan argued the locus of evolution had changed from species to society. Or, as Veblen put it: "It is in the human material that the continuity of development is to be looked for."⁵¹

The evolutionary point of view, therefore, leaves no place for a formulation of natural laws in terms of definitive normality, whether in economics or in any other branch of inquiry.⁵² Veblen's *Weltanschauung* is not rendered in terms of harmony as Schaffle's is, but, quite the contrary, in terms of its explicit absence, in terms of disharmony; the process, rather than the perceived ideal of normality, is the subject of Veblen's biological metaphor.

⁴⁵ Tilman, Rick. *The Intellectual Legacy of Thorstein Veblen: Unresolved Issues*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Veblen. "Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?", p. 390-391.

⁴⁷ Hodgson, Geoffrey Martin. "Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class and the Genesis of Evolutionary Economics", in Warren J. Samuels (ed.), *The Founding of Institutional Economics*. London: Routledge, 1998.

⁴⁸ Morgan, C. Lloyd. *Habit and Instinct*. London: Edward Arnold, 1896, p. 340

⁴⁹ Veblen, Thorstein. *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1914, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Ruse, Michael. *The Evolution Wars: A Guide to the Debates*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001, p. 20.

⁵¹ Veblen. "Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?", p. 388.

⁵² Veblen. "Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?", p. 391-392.

Preliminary Conclusion

This is not to say that there were not similarities in Schäffle's and Veblen's biological approaches to the socioeconomic sphere. At least since "*organismus*" was first used by G.E. Stahl in his 1708 *Theoria medica vera* as the binary opposite of "*mechanismus*," the German tradition of political economy rendered society in light of this challenge to the Cartesian paradigm.⁵³ Economic theory became sociological in its insistence on an organic symbiosis between disparate facets of the social whole, economy being seen as an integral aspect of the overarching concept of society. Schäffle and Veblen both inherited this economic *mentalité*, and, in this now heterodox tradition of economics, the organic theory of social sciences survived the shift of biological metaphors relatively unharmed. The mainstream canon, however, has proved equally averse to both writers: Schäffle has been dismissed as "a pathetic figure in modern history,"⁵⁴ Veblen as a "scientific nihilist."⁵⁵

Although the biological metaphor shift occurred, to a large extent, parallel to the development of mainstream economics, it can nonetheless shed light on the larger issues of methodology and the use of metaphors in the social sciences. It has been warned that "model builders may lose sight of their construct's metaphoricity,"⁵⁶ what originated as a tool becoming the guiding principle around which theory as well as practice orbited. Wittgenstein's saying that "If all I have is a hammer, all I see is nails" indeed seems as representative of Schäffle as of the physics-enviuous classical economists he wrote against. Veblen's approach, while probably better at social diagnosis than social cure, is remarkable in so far as it allows reality to direct the modelling endeavour, rather than the other way around. Schäffle might, as the saying goes, "be accurately wrong," but Veblen was "approximately right." Ideology will dictate our model of preference.

To conclude, it should be noted that the concept of the term "body politic" has undergone a renaissance of sorts in the recent historiography of the social sciences.⁵⁷ Inspired, perhaps, by the post-modern infatuation with the body as object, agent, and key to understanding various histories ranging from the social to the feminine, the connection of body and society has been explored again along somewhat formulaic Foucauldian lines charting the calculus of power connecting the individual to the state. The original term "body politic," however, also exists today on an entirely different level

⁵³ Hutter. "Organism as a Metaphor", p. 290.

⁵⁴ Small. "Some Contributions", p. 177.

⁵⁵ Coats, A.W. "The Influence of Veblen's Methodology", *Journal of Political Economy*, 62, no. 6 (1954), p. 531.

⁵⁶ Klamer, Arjo, and Thomas C. Leonard. "So What's an Economic Metaphor?", in Mirowski, *Natural Images in Economic Thought*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Porter. "History of the Body", pp. 233-253.

of discourse. No longer an analytical instrument, it has been ostracized to the sphere of satire and sarcasm, appearing as a marketing catch-phrase in works ranging from the autobiography of former wrestler and then Governor of Minnesota Jesse “the Body” Ventura to the Canadian gay lifestyle magazine *Body Politic* to articles on voter representation in elections.⁵⁸ From being the reigning model of human society for millennia, it has died in theory only to linger on in popular consciousness.

By resurrecting the original, analytical metaphor of the body politic as it appeared in Schäffle’s *Bau und Leben*, I hope to have shown that the organic, holistic nature of “welfare economics,” traceable from the early Italian mercantilists through Cameralism and the German Historical School to the American Institutional School,⁵⁹ survived the paradigmatic shift in biology following the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. While the analytical use of the biological metaphor changed, its underlying meaning of organic interdependency, as opposed to the hedonistic individualism so characteristic of mainstream economics, remained unchanged in the shift between Schäffle and Veblen. Thorstein Veblen can, however, hardly be considered a representative of orthodoxy, and what was true for the American institutionalists is probably not true for neoclassical economics. It could indeed be argued that systemic and synergetic effects in economics were lost to its post-institutional practitioners with the emancipation of the individual from the body politic. The synergies of economic life also became less obvious under the new Darwinian metaphor than under the old metaphor of the body politic, and the old biological metaphor similarly renders the cohesiveness and embeddedness of economic activities much better than does today’s evolutionary metaphor.

The old biological metaphor of the body politic made the interdependence of specialized social parts obvious, as the distinctive skills offered by the eye, the hand, and the brain all were necessary for the success of the whole. Christine de Pizan, writing in 1406, seems emblematic of this:

⁵⁸ Ventura, Jesse. *I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic from the Bottom Up*. New York: Signet, 2000; Grossman, Lawrence K. “Who Took the Body out of the Body Politic?” *Columbia Journalism Review* 41, no. 5 (2003), pp. 49-50; O’Connor, Erin. “Epitaph for the Body Politic.” *Science as Culture* 11, no. 3 (2002), p. 406.

⁵⁹ Balabkins, Nicholas W. *Not by Theory Alone... The Economics of Gustav von Schmoller and its Legacy to America*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1988.

“For just as the human body is not whole, but defective and deformed when it lacks any of its members, so the body politic cannot be perfect, whole, nor healthy if all the estates of which we speak are not well joined and united together. Thus, they can help and aid each other, each exercising the office which it has to, which diverse offices ought to serve only for the conservation of the whole community, just as the members of the human body aid to guide and nourish the whole body. And in so far as one of them fails, the whole feels it and is deprived by it.”⁶⁰

Different economic factors were thus also seen as cumulative in their benefits, an idea that only now is being brought back into economics by emerging alternative approaches like that of the National Innovation Systems. One could, however, argue that the two biological metaphors in the end may be seen as having supplied diametrically opposite ideologies: the social Darwinism apparent in Margaret Thatcher’s maxim “there is no such thing as society” can only be seen as the antithesis of the body politic. While economic theory has considered man to be a proverbial island for centuries, this does not mean that the metaphor of the body politic cannot supply us with pertinent answers to questions we have stopped asking, quite the contrary.

Appendix A:

	Albert Schäffle	Thorstein Veblen
Level of Metaphorical Abstraction	Low-Metaphor used to guide detailed typology of social phenomena	High-Metaphor used as engine of overriding cosmology
Concept of Progress	Teleological by Darwinian Natural Selection	Non-teleological by Darwinian Evolution
Internal Unity	Harmonious	Disharmonious
Ideal Social System	Socialism the ideal state of human coexistence	"Ideals" possible only in relation to their contexts

⁶⁰ Pizan, Catherine de. *The Book of the Body Politic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 90.

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