

Review: Chris Stringer, *The Origin of Our Species*, Allen Lane, London, 2011.

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The topics of human evolution and the origins of human society have been of interest to Marxists since the time of Marx and Engels. The origins of modern human society have been an area of considerable debate on a number of fronts with Marx and Engels theories of a form of primitive communism existing in hunter gatherer societies often counter-posed with theories of humans as 'naked apes' with conflict and hierarchical structures being the norm. These naked ape theories are often used as evidence that a socialist society is impossible and that it is simply 'human nature' that modern capitalist society is structured in such a way that a minority of people effectively have the power and influence to control society. Various theories of human evolution which portray different races as evolving in distinctly different regions, known as multi region models, have also been used to justify racism of varying degrees. These topics and many others are all covered in Chris Stringer's latest book.

Chris Stringer is a research leader in human origins at the Natural History Museum in London and is regarded as one of the world's foremost experts on human evolution. He has consistently been at the centre of many of the varied debates on the topic for almost four decades. His research and collaborations have made a major impact on our understanding of how and where our species developed. He is perhaps best known for his work on the recent African origin hypothesis which is now almost universally accepted. His latest book, *The Origin of Our Species*, sets out to explain the most recent evidence and theories about the origins of modern humans.

Stringer's book is an excellent summation of the history of our understanding of the evolution of modern humans detailing developments in both archaeological finds and the often conflicting theories resulting from them. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the book for most readers with only a passing knowledge of human evolution will be the very different picture of the process from the often portrayed image of a steady linear advance from ape to modern human. The reality is decidedly different, the archaeological evidence is often open to varying interpretation and there are often many, sometimes conflicting, theories seeking to explain them. Given the time span over which humans have evolved it is far from surprising that the fossil record is patchy at best and the remains found are often badly damaged and frequently far from complete specimens, in some cases no more than a few individual bones or a handful of teeth. Stringer's analysis is inherently materialist, starting with the available evidence he discusses the scientific analysis of the fossil record and the frequent difficulties and uncertainties associated with the analysis. He frequently presents the reader with a verity of conflicting theories but is always careful to present these ideas in light of the available evidence and occasionally concluding that there is not yet sufficient evidence to be conclusive about the interpretations. We are frequently reminded that the division of various stages of human evolution into distinct species is of course a human construct and there is still significant debate over the exact nature of various fossils. The overlap between the various 'archaic' human species, including the Nean-

derthals, and early modern or cro-magnon humans can be significant making a definitive interpretation of the fossils extremely difficult.

Several chapters dealing with the origins of modern human society and behaviour will be of particular interest to Marxists. In the discussion of the development of human society the evidence of the interplay of the increase in the level of technology employed with the increased complexity in society lends significant support to Friedrich Engels' 1876 work *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*¹. In this work Engels argued that labour was central to man's evolution. Building from Darwens theories on evolution Engels dialectical analysis was in stark contrast to the accepted view of the day that human evolution began with the development of larger brains and intellects which in turn lead to walking upright and the use of hands to make tools. While Engels recognised all these steps in human evolution his keen insight at the time, in spite of the incredibly limited fossil record then uncovered and the prevailing idealist philosophy of the time which placed a primacy on thought as the driver of cultural change, was to reorder the sequence of events. Engels argued that the first step in this transition was the ability to walk upright, this in turn freed the hands which were gradually adopted to tool use. This increased use of tools in turn lead to an increased control over nature with an attendant increase in sociability as our early ancestors would have required an increased level of communication which in turn influenced the evolution of larger brains which in turn further influenced the development of tools and so on. The up to date evidence presented in Stringer's book strongly supports Engels dialectical approach and the

archaeological record shows the increase in tool usage and complexity as well as the techniques used in their manufacture is paralleled by an increased complexity in society which can be inferred from the increased appearance of decorative items of clothing such as beads and shells as well as an increased appearance of art and the earliest surviving musical instruments (dating back almost 40,000 years). The art discovered both in cave paintings and in carved objects and figures is occasionally not simply representative but apparently symbolic including representations of human figures with animal heads. This symbolism is strongly suggestive of a society where the level of communication has developed well beyond simply indicating immediate needs to a level capable of thinking abstractly and planning ahead. A level of communication which would of course have been necessary for our early ancestors to further their ability to shape the world around them to meet not just immediate short term needs but also less immediate medium to long term needs.

Stringer's strongly materialist analysis of his subject matter is the main strength of his work. In analysing the views of Marx and Engels on the development of human society Chris Harman correctly pointed out that the main insight was the development of a new understanding of how humans relate to the world around them (historical materialism) and that this involved

'rejecting the two dominant ways of seeing this relationship: idealism which sees human beings as semi-divine, subject to Gods will and completely separate from the animal world; and crude materialism which hold humans to be no more

¹Frederich Engels, *The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm>

than machines or animals, either simply reacting to stimuli from the external world (today generally labelled 'behaviourism'), or as biologically programmed to perform in certain ways (today, called 'sociobiology').²

Stringer avoids both of these viewpoints clearly asserting that while genetic studies of our ancient ancestors can yield significant information there is far more to the development of human society and genetics nearly sets certain limits such as a maximum possible brain size. The discussion of the interaction of early humans with Neanderthals is also interesting and while not ruling out possible conflicts between the two species Stringer points to a much more nuanced and subtle relationship. Taking into account studies showing possible interbreeding between the species, important differences in phys-

iology and prevailing climatic conditions he paints a picture of a complex interplay with numerous factors playing a role in the eventual demise of Neanderthals and survival of Homo Sapiens. These interactions between two species who may well have had significant physical and cultural differences is a strong rejection of the often encountered 'naked ape' theories which paint early humans as an embodiment of the supposed violence and desire for dominance which it is often asserted as representing 'human nature'.

In all Stringer's book represents an astounding collection of the most up to date research on the topic of modern human evolution. Much of the detail contained in it is not available outside of academic journals which are often difficult for people outside of the field of study to follow or even access. This book offers a clear and comprehensive introduction for anyone interested in the subject.

²Chris Harman, 'Engels and the Origins of Human Society', *International Socialism* 2:65, Winter 1994.<http://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/engels.htm>