

Ragnar Redbeard and the Right of Might

Sidney E. Parker

“It is surely one of the most incendiary works ever to be published anywhere.”

–James J. Martin

“A vitriolic, racist hymn to the doctrine of force.”

–Chris Cuneen

A MAN

Might Is Right is a book whose survival has nothing to do with popular acclaim or academic attention. It has, nonetheless, been read and discussed by a continuing circle of individuals for some 85 years, necessitating several editions. Originally published in 1896, it was reprinted as late as 1972. Erratic, inspiring, infuriating, a mixture of individualistic sense and collective nonsense, it outlines a case for “social darwinism” that is one of the frankest and most powerful I have ever seen.

There is no certainty as to who the author, Ragnar Redbeard, was. The most likely candidate is a man named Arthur Desmond who was red-bearded, red-haired and whose poetry was very similar to that written by Redbeard. Born in New Zealand of an Irish father and an English mother, his actual date of birth is unknown, 1842 and 1859 being two of the years given. While in New Zealand, Desmond stood as a radical candidate for parliament, organized trade unions, championed the ideas of Henry George, supported the Maori leader Te Kooti, and edited a radical paper called *The Tribune*.

In 1892 Desmond left New Zealand for Sydney, Australia. Here he continued his political activities, edited *Hard Cash* and *The Standard Bearer*, wrote poetry which influenced the famous Australian poet, Henry Lawson, joined the Labour Party, and associated with radical personalities like John Dwyer who had known Marx and Bakunin. It is said that he left Australia in 1895, taking with him the unpublished manuscript of *Might is Right*. Any account of Desmond’s subsequent career after leaving Australia is largely based on conjecture. He is said to have published *Redbeard’s Review* in London, to have lived in Chicago, where he co-authored a book called *Rival Caesars* with Will H. Dilg (using the pseudonym “Desmond Dilg” for the occasion), and edited the *Lion’s Paw* under the name of Richard Thurland. His date of death is not certain. One version has him dying in Palestine in 1918 “while on service with General Allenby’s troops,” another version claims he died in 1926, again in Palestine. On the other hand, I have been told that he was running a bookshop in Chicago as late as 1927. And this is to discount not only the more bizarre stories such as that he was really Ambrose Bierce and was shot during the Mexican Revolution, but also the fact that there seems to be no definite evidence that Redbeard and Desmond were the same individual....

A BOOK

What is certain, however, is that if Desmond was Redbeard, then his views must have undergone a drastic change toward the end of his stay in Australia. *Might Is Right* is no manifesto of a political radical intent on the “emancipation of the workers.” I cannot conceive of any of our contemporary saviours of the proletariat recommending it as required reading, even though it is

claimed that it influenced some of the early Wobblies. And it certainly has no appeal for those sentimental totalitarians who profess “care” and “love” for mankind.

Redbeard sets out the theme of his book in a prefatory note entitled “All Else Is Error.”

“The natural world is a world of war; the natural man is a warrior; the natural law is tooth and claw. All else is error. A condition of combat everywhere exists. We are born into perpetual conflict. It is our inheritance even as it was the inheritance of previous generations. The ‘condition of combat’ may be disguised with the holy phrases of St. Francis, or the soft, deceitful doctrines of a Kropotkin or a Tolstoy, but it cannot eventually be evaded by any human being...It rules all things...and it *decides* all who imagine policemanized populations, internationally regulated tranquility, and State organized industrialism so joyful, blessed and divine.”

But in this war of each against all there are only a small number of victors. They alone conquer power and enjoy the loot. This is because “The great mass of men who inhabit the world of today have no initiative, no originality or independence of thought, but are mere subjective individualities, who never had the slightest voice in fashioning the ideas that they formally revere.” The “average man...is a born thrall habituated from childhood to be governed by others.” The majority of the common people can never become free, they are but the sediment from which all the more valuable elements have long been distilled...Mastership is right, mastership is natural, mastership is eternal. But only for those who cannot overthrow it, and trample it beneath their hoofs.”

On the other hand, the strong man is the free man and “freemen should never regulate their conduct by the suggestion or dicta of others, for when they do they are no longer free.” The free man is “above all laws, all constitutions, all theories of right and wrong. He supports and defends them, of course, so long as they suit his own end, but if they don’t then he annihilates them by the easiest and most direct method.” “Liberty is honestly definable as a state of complete bodily and mental self-mastership...and thoroughgoing independence from all official coercion or restraint.” It is synonymous with proprietorship. To be propertyless and unarmed is the condition of actual dependence and servitude. Unarmed citizens are enslaved citizens, always. Liberty without property is a myth, a nursery tale, believable only by babbling babies.

Redbeard rejects equality as another myth. Let us take the notion of “equality before the law.” “By what rational method can any two litigants be placed in a position of unconditioned ‘equality before the law?’ First of all, plaintiff and defendant always possess totally different physical and mental characteristics, different personal magnetisms—and different sized bank balances. Also all judges, juries and legal officials are unequal in temperament, ability, courage and honesty. Each one has his own peculiar idiosyncracies, prejudices, inferiorities, superstitions and—price....No two men are born alike: each one being literally born under his own particular star...‘Equality before the law’ is just a meaningless catchphrase.”

Equality is a lie because “every atom of organic matter has its own vital peculiarity. Every animate being is different in osseous structure and chemical composition. Ethnology, biology, history, all proclaim equality to be a myth. Even the great epics of antiquity are all glorifications of inequality: inequality of the mind, inequality of birth, of courage or condition...Mentally and morally, every breathing being is a self-poised monad—a differentiated ego. No two germs, planets, suns, or stars are alike. Among the higher vertebrates this is especially so, and consequently the

only law that men ought to honour or respect is the law that originates and finds its final sanction *in themselves*—in their own consciousness.”

For Ragnar Redbeard, then, life is struggle, life is war and in this war those who are the strongest, and have set aside the authority of laws and moral codes as suitable only for the submissive mass, will be the winners. They will remain winners, however, only to the extent that they can continue to prove themselves the strongest. If others arise who are stronger than they, then they will lose and new masters will take their place. In this way the “survival of the fittest” will prevail and will no longer be hampered or denied by doctrines of brotherhood or equality which have no roots in reality.

Redbeard does not deny the existence of oppression and exploitation now or in his future world of the strong. What he does deny are the hypocritical claims of the power-seekers that they are doing what they do out of altruistic love for those they want to dominate. Legalism and moralism are the masks of connivers and their acceptance by the strong will lead to weakness and degeneration. Redbeard’s position is not all that far from the Marquis de Sade, when he wrote: “Individuals who are not animated by strong passions are merely mediocre beings. It is only strong passions which can produce great men; when one is no longer...passionate, one becomes stupid. This point established, are not laws dangerous which inhibit the passions?”

A CRITIQUE

Although Redbeard claims to scorn moral codes, stating that “all arbitrary codes of right and wrong are insolent invasions of personal liberty” and that greatness lies “in being beyond and above all moral measurements,” he is, nonetheless, a moralist. He makes plain his antagonism to Judeo-Christian morality, but his whole approach is shot through with the perennial moralistic desire to redeem the human race from “evil.” For him, what is “natural” is “right” and the further human beings get away from “Nature,” the further they depart from “right.” Leaving aside the fact that “Nature” is a mental construct, not a fact, and that “Man” is nothing but an aggregate of individuals, the question remains as to how Redbeard would square his belief that “every breathing being” is a differentiated ego with his demand that all these differentiated egos accept the common goal of being “natural”—as he defines it. If I am unique, then what it is in my “nature” to be will not be the same as what it is in the “nature” of other individuals to be. Indeed, what is natural” for me may well be “unnatural” for others, and a collision unavoidable. Redbeard’s interpretation of “social darwinism” clearly allows for this, but his morality of Nature equally clearly negates it.

In fact, this contradiction is starkly illustrated by Redbeard himself when he comes to treat sexual relations between men and women. On the same page he proclaims that “moral principles...are artificial human enactments, but not necessarily natural, honest or true. Moral codes are the black terror of all dastards,” and then goes on to state that “readers must distinctly understand that *sexual morality* is nowise condemned in these pages.” This is because women are frail beings at the best of times...they must be held in thorough subjection” for “woe unto the Race if ever these lovable creatures should break loose from mastership, and become the rulers or equals of Man.” He follows this warning with a denunciation of “sexual degeneracy,” “promiscuity,” and other “evils,” in a language redolent of the very Christian morality he so fiercely attacks elsewhere. “If our modern Sodoms,” he writes, “were all razed to the ground, how Nature in all

her perennial purity would rejoice exultantly!” Substitute “God” for “Nature” and what religious moralist would object?

Redbeard’s view of the “nature” of women is in no way consistent. In one paragraph of his chapter on “Love, Women and War” he repeats his opinion of women as being “incapable of self-mastership...mere babies in worldly concerns,” but in the next paragraph writes that “when their passions are stirred women have performed deeds of heroism (and terror) that even a man with nerves of steel would hesitate at...They have led armies and been criminals of the darkest dye.” In claiming that women are destined to be “subjects” and at the same time are capable of being “rulers,” Redbeard effectively destroys his own case for male superiority and, what is more, seems oblivious of the fact that he is doing it!

Redbeard is also a racist believing that Anglo-Saxons are the superior race. Blacks, Jews, Asiatics and “degenerate whites” are all excluded from his class of supermen. His racism, however, undermines the logic of his “philosophy of power.” In a typical description of his philosophy he writes of the capitalist that he can ‘do as he likes with his own,’ *as long as he has the power*. He may own the earth...if he wants to, and he may buy or sell men and nations if he feels inclined to or thinks it profitable. There is in Nature no limit to his energies or ambitions. All that is needed is power equal to his energies or ambitions. All that is needed is power equal to the design. But the same principles may be acted upon by any other man or association of men, and in the conflict that ensues *fitness is proved—absolutely and without doubt*. The ‘rights of the rich’ are what they can maintain and the ‘rights of the poor’ are not less. No bounds are set to the accumulation of property, and none whatever to its re-distribution.”

If, therefore, “all that is needed” for the survival of the fittest is “power equal to the design” and “the same principles may be acted upon by any other man or association of men,” this must logically apply to all human beings. It follows that if a Black, a Jew, an Asiatic or a “degenerate white,” proves to be stronger than one of Redbeard’s Anglo-Saxon supermen, then he has no grounds upon which he can deny the victor his spoils. If I can do as I like with my own as long as I have the power, then it does not matter what race or colour I am for I have shown that I am the powerful one. Redbeard’s racism, like his sexism, is therefore completely inconsistent with his own “philosophy of power” since he can only defend it by using collectivist notions that deny his individualist premise that there are no “rights” outside the “might” of the individual.

Might Is Right is a work flawed by major contradictions. Like the Christian bible it can be used as a source for the most incompatible views, but unlike that venerable collection of idiocies and myths it is sustained by a crude vigor that at its most coherent can help to clear away not a few of the religious, moral and political superstitions bequeathed to us by our ancestors. Whoever Ragnar Redbeard was, and whatever criticisms may be justly levelled at his book, he remains worthy of the attention of all who are conscious that their “rights” are equal to their power.

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