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The Social Conquest of Earth, by Edward O. Wilson, Norton, 2012

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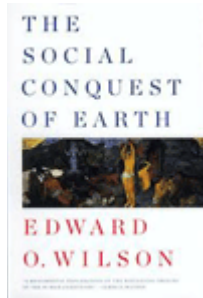
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Recommended Readings



The Social Conquest of Earth

by Edward O. Wilson, Norton 2012

Reviewed by Larry Riggs

This new book by the venerable evolutionary biologist and social thinker is a reflection on the three fundamental questions that have always fascinated thoughtful humans: Where did we come from? What are we? and Where are we going? Wilson's answer to the first two questions is that, like the ants, we are eusocial creatures evolved through the processes, both complementary and paradoxical, of individual and group selection. Only a few times, in the entire history of life, have species with complex social systems evolved. All such species have become dominant in their spheres, and we are the most highly organized and the most dominant of them. Wilson argues that, while natural selection favors individual organisms with "selfish" tendencies, it simultaneously favors groups with large proportions of individuals exhibiting what we call altruism. Such groups tend to win in conflicts with other groups. This implies that hostility between groups has been a factor in the "refinement" of eusociality. The science deployed by Wilson is persuasive. It also seems to connect with issues central to the humanities and social sciences. The twin forces of evolution, for example, could be taken to underlie the perennial conflicts in drama and literature between desire and duty. They also cast interesting light on Freud's Pleasure Principle and Reality Principle. As for the third question, Wilson's science, it seems to me, can inform our urgent attempts to answer it, but, ultimately, insofar as it implies any margin for choice, it is not a scientific question.

- Larry Riggs is Professor of French at Butler University.