

Review on Social Darwinism

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ABSTRACT

This study is the review on social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is a term scholars use to describe the practice of misapplying the biological evolutionary language of Charles Darwin to politics, the economy, and society. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is entirely focused on an explanation of life's biological diversity. Social Darwinism is any of various theories of society which emerged in the United Kingdom, North America, and Western Europe in the 1870s, claiming to apply biological concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest to sociology and politics. Social Darwinists argue that the strong should see their wealth and power increase while the weak should see their wealth and power decrease. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is one of the most important books in the annals of both science and history. In *Origin* and in his subsequent writing Darwin offered a revolutionary scientific theory: the process of evolution through natural selection. According to Darwin's theory of evolution, only the plants and animals best adapted to their environment will survive to reproduce and transfer their genes to the next generation. Animals and plants that are poorly adapted to their environment will not survive to reproduce. Charles Darwin published his notions on natural selection and the theory of evolution in his influential 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*. In conclusion Social Darwinism truly existed in the minds of society rather than the philosopher Herbert Spencer. It did not have much of an effect on how society lived its life because it reinforced the competitive and materialistic nature that had become so prevalent in the late nineteenth century.

Keywords: Review, social, Darwinism, Environment, competitive and materialistic nature.

INTRODUCTION

Social Darwinism is a term scholars use to describe the practice of misapplying the biological evolutionary language of Charles Darwin to politics, the economy, and society. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is entirely focused on an explanation of life's biological diversity [1]. It is a scientific theory meant to explain observations about species. Yet some have used the theory to justify a particular view of human social, political, or economic conditions. All such ideas have one fundamental flaw: They use a purely scientific theory for a completely unscientific purpose. In doing so they misrepresent and misappropriate Darwin's original ideas. One such distortion and misuse is the loose collection of ideologies grouped under the label of "Social Darwinism." Based

largely on notions of competition and natural selection, Social Darwinist theories generally hold that the powerful in society are innately better than the weak and that success is proof of their superiority. Darwin passionately opposed social injustice and oppression. He would have been dismayed to see the events of generations to come: his name attached to opposing ideologies from Marxism to unbridled capitalism, and to policies from ethnic cleansing to forced sterilization. Whether used to rationalize social inequality, racism, or eugenics, so-called Social Darwinist theories are a gross misreading of the ideas first described in the *Origin of Species* and applied in modern biology [2] [3].

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United Kingdom, North America, and Western Europe in the 1870s, claiming to apply biological concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest to sociology and politics. [4] Social Darwinists argue that the strong should see their wealth and power increase while the weak should see their wealth and power decrease. Different social-Darwinist groups have differing views about which groups of people are considered to be the strong and which groups of people are considered to be the weak, and they also hold different opinions about the precise mechanisms that should be used to reward strength and punish weakness. Many such views stress competition between individuals in laissez-faire capitalism, while others were used in support of authoritarianism, eugenics, racism, imperialism, fascism, Nazism, and struggle between national or racial groups [5].

As a scientific concept, Social Darwinism broadly declined in popularity following World War I and was largely discredited by the end of World War II, partially due to its association with Nazism and partially due to a growing scientific consensus that it was scientifically groundless [6] Later theories that were categorized as social Darwinism were generally described as such as a critique by their opponents; their proponents did not identify themselves by such a label. [7] Creationists have often maintained that social Darwinism—leading to policies designed to reward the most competitive—is a logical consequence of "Darwinism" (the theory of natural selection in biology).[9] Biologists and historians have stated that this is a fallacy of appeal to nature, since the theory of natural selection is merely intended as a description of a biological phenomenon and should not be taken to imply that this phenomenon is good or that it ought to be used as a moral guide in human society.[8] While most scholars recognize some historical links between the popularization of Darwin's theory and forms of social Darwinism, they also maintain that social Darwinism is not a

necessary consequence of the principles of biological evolution.

Scholars debate the extent to which the various social Darwinist ideologies reflect Charles Darwin's own views on human social and economic issues. His writings have passages that can be interpreted as opposing aggressive individualism, while other passages appear to promote it. [9] Darwin's early evolutionary views and his opposition to slavery ran counter to many of the claims that social Darwinists would eventually make about the mental capabilities of the poor and colonial indigenes. [10] After the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, one strand of Darwin's followers, led by Sir John Lubbock, argued that natural selection ceased to have any noticeable effect on humans once organized societies had been formed.[11] However, some scholars argue that Darwin's view gradually changed and came to incorporate views from other theorists such as Herbert Spencer. Spencer published his Lamarckian evolutionary ideas about society before Darwin first published his hypothesis in 1859, and both Spencer and Darwin promoted their own conceptions of moral values. Spencer supported laissez-faire capitalism on the basis of his Lamarckian belief that struggle for survival spurred self-improvement which could be inherited. An important proponent in Germany was Ernst Haeckel, who popularized Darwin's thought and his personal interpretation of it, and used it as well to contribute to a new creed, the monist movement [12] [13].

Social Darwinism is a loose set of ideologies that emerged in the late 1800s in which Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was used to justify certain political, social, or economic views. Social Darwinists believe in "survival of the fittest" the idea that certain people become powerful in society because they are innately better. Social Darwinism has been used to justify imperialism, racism, eugenics and social inequality at various times over the past century and a half.

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is one of the most important books in the annals of both science and history. In *Origin* and in his subsequent writing Darwin offered a revolutionary scientific theory: the process of evolution through natural selection

In short, natural selection means that plants and animals evolve over time in nature as new species arise from spontaneous mutations at the point of reproduction and battle with other plants and animals to get food, avoid being killed, and have offspring. Darwin pointed to fossil records, among other evidence, in support of his theory [14].

Social Darwinism

Soon, some sociologists and others were taking up words and ideas which Darwin had used to describe the biological world, and they were adopting them to their own ideas and theories about the human social world. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these Social Darwinists took up the language of evolution to frame an understanding of the growing gulf between the rich and the poor as well as the many differences between cultures all over the world [15] [16]. The explanation they arrived at was that businessmen and others who were economically and socially successful were so because they were biologically and socially "naturally" the fittest. Conversely, they reasoned that the poor were "naturally" weak and unfit and it would be an error to allow the weak of the species to continue to breed. They believed that the dictum "survival of the fittest" (a term coined not by Charles Darwin but by sociologist Herbert Spencer) meant that only the fittest should survive. Unlike Darwin, these sociologists and others were not biologists. They were adapting and corrupting Darwin's language for their own social, economic, and political explanations. While Darwin's theory remains a cornerstone of modern biology to this day, the views of the Social Darwinists are no longer accepted, as they were based on an erroneous

interpretation of the theory of evolution [17].

Evolution and Natural Selection

According to Darwin's theory of evolution, only the plants and animals best adapted to their environment will survive to reproduce and transfer their genes to the next generation. Animals and plants that are poorly adapted to their environment will not survive to reproduce. Charles Darwin published his notions on natural selection and the theory of evolution in his influential 1859 book *On the Origin of Species* [18]. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was a scientific theory focused on explaining his observations about biological diversity and why different species of plants and animals look different. Darwin borrowed popular concepts, including "survival of the fittest," from sociologist Herbert Spencer and "struggle for existence" from economist Thomas Malthus, who had earlier written about how human societies evolve over time. Darwin rarely commented on the social implications of his theories. But to those who followed Spencer and Malthus, Darwin's theory appeared to be confirming with science what they already believed to be true about human society that the fit inherited qualities such as industriousness and the ability to accumulate wealth, while the unfit were innately lazy and stupid [19].

Survival of the Fittest and Laissez-Faire Capitalism

After Darwin published his theories on biological evolution and natural selection, Herbert Spencer drew further parallels between his economic theories and Darwin's scientific principles. Spencer applied the idea of "survival of the fittest" to so-called laissez faire or unrestrained capitalism during the Industrial Revolution, in which businesses are allowed to operate with little regulation from the government. Unlike Darwin, Spencer believed that people could genetically pass learned qualities, such as frugality and morality, on to their children. Spencer opposed any laws that helped workers, the poor, and those he deemed genetically weak. Such laws, he

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argued, would go against the evolution of civilization by delaying the extinction of the “unfit.” Another prominent Social Darwinist was American economist William Graham Sumner. He was an early opponent of the welfare state. He viewed individual competition for property and social status as a tool for eliminating the weak and immoral of the population [20].

Poverty and Eugenics

Many sociologists and political theorists turned to Social Darwinism to argue against government programs to aid the poor, as they believed that poverty was the result of natural inferiority, which should be bred out of the human population [21]. Herbert Spencer gave as an example a young woman from upstate New York named Margaret, whom he described as a “gutter-child.” Because government aid had kept her alive, Margaret had, as Spencer wrote, “proved to be the prolific mother” of two hundred descendants who were “idiots, imbeciles, drunkards, lunatics, paupers, and prostitutes.” Spencer concluded by asking, “Was it kindness or cruelty which, generation after generation, enabled these to multiply and become an increasing curse to the society around them?”

These ideas inspired the eugenics movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which sought to improve the health and intelligence of the human race by sterilizing individuals it deemed “feeble-minded” or otherwise “unfit.” Eugenic sterilizations, which disproportionately targeted women, minorities, and immigrants, continued in the United States until the 1970s

As social Darwinist rationalizations of inequality gained popularity in the late 1800s, British scholar Sir Francis Galton (a half-cousin of Darwin) launched a new “science” aimed at improving the human race by ridding society of its “undesirables.” He called it eugenics. Galton proposed to better humankind by propagating the British elite. He argued that social institutions such as welfare and mental asylums allowed inferior humans to survive and reproduce at higher levels than their superior

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counterparts in Britain’s wealthy class. Galton’s ideas never really took hold in his country, but they became popular in America where the concepts of eugenics quickly gained strength. Eugenics became a popular social movement in the United States that peaked in the 1920s and 1930s. Books and films promoted eugenics, while local fairs and exhibitions held “fitter family” and “better baby” competitions around the country [22]. The eugenics movement in the United States focused on eliminating undesirable traits from the population. Proponents of the eugenics movement reasoned the best way to do this was by preventing “unfit” individuals from having children. During the first part of the twentieth century, 32 U.S. states passed laws that resulted in the forced sterilization of more than 64,000 Americans including immigrants, people of color, unmarried mothers and the mentally ill.

Nazi Germany

Adolf Hitler, one of the world’s most notorious eugenicists, drew inspiration from California’s forced sterilizations of the “feeble-minded” in designing Nazi Germany’s racially based policies. Hitler began reading about eugenics and social Darwinism while he was imprisoned following a failed 1924 coup attempt known as the Beer Hall Putsch. Hitler adopted the social Darwinist take on survival of the fittest. He believed the German master race had grown weak due to the influence of non-Aryans in Germany. To Hitler, survival of the German “Aryan” race depended on its ability to maintain the purity of its gene pool. The Nazis targeted certain groups or races that they considered biologically inferior for extermination [23] [24]. These included Jews, Roma (gypsies), Poles, Soviets, people with disabilities and homosexuals. By the end of World War II, social Darwinist and eugenic theories had fallen out of favor in the United States and much of Europe—partly due to their associations with Nazi programs and propaganda, and because these theories were scientifically unfounded.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion Social Darwinism truly existed in the minds of society rather than the philosopher Herbert Spencer. It did not have much of an effect on how society lived its life because it reinforced the competitive and materialistic nature that had become so prevalent in the late nineteenth century. Due to Social Darwinism, more people saw that, "because science says it is natural to screw-over those beneath you." People did not alter any part of their behavior when the concept came along. The concept possible thanks to the scientific work of Lamarck and Darwin in the field of evolution. Lamarck had started the journey asking the right questions but coming up with the wrong answers. Knowing what was wrong; Darwin came in and filled in the blanks. In between the two evolutionary theories, Spencer was at

work piecing together society and science; this was only natural for a sociologist trying to explain the common and natural ways of people. Spencer achieved his goal of defining the people of his era; he supported big business, stepped on the little guys, and wanted very little government interference in the government [25]. Without the work of these three men, the world might not have seen racism on such a large scale (Holocaust in Europe and Ku Klux Klan in America) and nationalist uprisings based on expelling minorities throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century's. Minorities were seen as the "less fit" creatures and Social Darwinism stated that it was okay to mistreat the poor because the natural process had put them there.

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