

# Social Darwinism in American Thought

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## Conclusion

The entire modern deification of survival *per se*, survival returning to itself, survival naked and abstract, with the denial of any substantive excellence in *what* survives, except the capacity for more survival still, is surely the strangest intellectual stopping-place ever proposed by one man to another.

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There was nothing in Darwinism that inevitably made it an apology for competition or force. Kropotkin's interpretation of Darwinism was as logical as Sumner's. Ward's rejection of biology as a source of social principles was no less natural than Spencer's assumption of a universal dynamic common to biology and society alike. The Christian denial of Darwinian "realism" in social theory was no less natural, as a human reaction, than the harsh logic of the "scientific school." Darwinism had from the first this dual potentiality; intrinsically it was a neutral instrument, capable of supporting opposite ideologies. How, then, can one account for the ascendancy, until the 1890's, of the rugged individualist's interpretation of Darwinism?

The answer is that American society saw its own image in the tooth-and-claw version of natural selection, and that its dominant groups were therefore able to dramatize this vision of competition as a thing good in itself. Ruthless business rivalry and unprincipled politics seemed to be justified by the survival philosophy. As long as the dream of personal conquest and individual assertion motivated the middle class, this philosophy seemed tenable, and its critics remained a minority.

This version of Darwinism depended for its continuance upon a general acceptance of unrestrained competition. But nothing is so unstable as "pure" business competition;

nothing is so disastrous to the unlucky or unskilled competitor; nothing, as Benjamin Kidd foresaw, is so difficult as to keep the growing number of the "unfit" reconciled to the operations of such a regime. In time the American middle class shrank from the principle it had glorified, turned in flight from the hideous image of rampant competitive brutality, and repudiated the once heroic entrepreneur as a despoiler of the nation's wealth and morals and a monopolist of its opportunities.

With this reaction came the first conclusive victories of the critics of Darwinian individualism—although it is pertinent to note that the material gains of political and economic reformers were far less complete than their ideological triumphs. When Americans were once in the mood to listen to critics of Darwinian individualism, it was no difficult task for these critics to destroy its flimsy logical structure and persuade their audiences that it had all been a ghastly mistake. Spencer, and the men of Spencer's generation in America, thought that he had written a grand preface to destiny. Their sons came to wonder at its monumental dullness and its quaint self-confidence, and thought of it—if they thought of it at all—only as a revealing commentary on a dead age.

While Darwinian individualism declined, Darwinian collectivism of the nationalist or racist variety was beginning to take hold. Darwinism was made to fit the mold of international conflict-ideologies (a process that had been going on in Europe for a long time) just when its inapplicability to domestic economics was becoming apparent. It had been possible for the theorists of reform to show that, in nature, group cohesion and solidarity had been of value to survival and that individual self-assertion was the exception, not the rule. At a time of imperialist friction there was nothing to stop the advocates of expansion and the propagandists of militarism from invoking these very shibboleths of group survival, or from transmuting them into a doctrine of group assertiveness and racial destiny to justify the ways of international competition. The survival of the fittest had once been

used chiefly to support business competition at home; now it was used to support expansion abroad.

These dogmas were employed with success until the outbreak of the First World War. Then, ironically, the "Anglo-Saxon" peoples were swept by a revulsion from international violence. They now turned about and with one voice accused the enemy of being the sole advocate of "racial" aggression and militarism. One-sided and false as it was, the notion that the Germans had a monopoly of militaristic thought had at least the compensation that it put the American people in a frame of mind to repudiate such dogmas. Forever after, Darwinian militarism sounded too much like dangerous German talk.

As a conscious philosophy, social Darwinism had largely disappeared in America by the end of the war. It is significant that since 1914 there has been far less Darwinian individualism in America than there was in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. There were, of course, still at large and in places of responsibility men who thought that Sumner's essays were the last word in economics. Darwinian individualism has persisted as a part of political folklore, even though its rhetoric is seldom heard in formal discussion; the folklore of politics can embrace contradictions that are less admissible in self-conscious social theory. But, with these allowances, it is safe to say that Darwinian individualism is no longer congenial to the mood of the nation.

A resurgence of social Darwinism, in either its individualist or imperialist uses, is always a possibility so long as there is a strong element of predacity in society.<sup>1</sup> Biologists will continue to make technical criticisms of natural selection as a theory of development, but these criticisms are not likely to affect social thought. This is true partly because the phrase "survival of the fittest" has a fixed place in the public mind, and partly because of the complexity and the esoteric quality of technical criticisms.

There is certainly some interaction between social ideas and social institutions. Ideas have effects as well as causes. The history of Darwinian individualism, however, is a clear

example of the principle that changes in the structure of social ideas wait on general changes in economic and political life. In determining whether such ideas are accepted, truth and logic are less important criteria than suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of social interests. This is one of the great difficulties that must be faced by rational strategists of social change.

Whatever the course of social philosophy in the future, however, a few conclusions are now accepted by most humanists: that such biological ideas as the "survival of the fittest," whatever their doubtful value in natural science, are utterly useless in attempting to understand society; that the life of man in society, while it is incidentally a biological fact, has characteristics that are not reducible to biology and must be explained in the distinctive terms of a cultural analysis; that the physical well-being of men is a result of their social organization and not vice versa; that social improvement is a product of advances in technology and social organization, not of breeding or selective elimination; that judgments as to the value of competition between men or enterprises or nations must be based upon social and not allegedly biological consequences; and, finally, that there is nothing in nature or a naturalistic philosophy of life to make impossible the acceptance of moral sanctions that can be employed for the common good.