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EVOLUTION

*The Remarkable History of a
Scientific Theory*



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THE SPROUTING OF SOCIAL DARWINISM

To value competition fit the spirit of the age; its roots extended long before the publication of *Origin of Species*. Indeed, Darwinism represented simply one among many logical developments of an increasingly pervasive Western mindset that accepted competition among people or groups of people as socially beneficial. During the late 1700s, Adam Smith argued that economic progress depended on individual competition. His faith in the natural harmony of human interactions gave him hope that all people would benefit from *laissez-faire* capitalism. Embracing *laissez-faire*, Thomas Malthus soon observed that some individuals must gain and others lose in any social competition due to limited resources. Referring to the process as a “struggle for existence” (at least in the context of primitive human societies), Malthus wrote of the “goad of necessity” bringing out the best in people.¹⁶ As early as 1851, in his breakthrough book *Social Statics*, Herbert Spencer began sketching out his concept that a form of natural selection, which he termed “survival of the fittest,” worked hand-in-hand with an essentially Lamarckian type of evolution to generate human progress over time. Since it continually culled the unfit, Spencer saw selection as maintaining human quality.

With *Origin of Species*, Darwin pushed this line of reasoning a critical step further by presenting competition as producing fitter varieties, races, and, ultimately, species. Spencer and many other Victorian social scientists quickly accepted the key Darwinian insight: Regardless of the source of variations (whether chance, acquired characteristics, internal factors, or

even God), all aspects of human nature and behavior, like everything else in the biological world, originate and evolve through the selection of individuals who display particular traits. Nothing was exempt, not even altruistic behavior or belief in the divine, both of which Darwin in *Descent of Man* attempted to explain in terms of their survival values for the individual or group. In its broadest sense, this was Social Darwinism, and its influence percolated throughout the social sciences and popular cultures in Europe and America.

Darwin was far from alone in seeking evolutionary explanations for human nature. His British disciple George Romanes joined in trying to find animal origins for human mental traits. Other social scientists in Europe and the United States did so, as well. Looking at the issue from the opposite end, Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, another self-proclaimed disciple of Darwin, saw much antisocial behavior as a throwback to humankind's savage ancestry. Born criminals, the criminally insane, and epileptics simply had failed to develop to the evolutionary level of their race, he explained, and are left behind as so-called "moral imbeciles."¹⁷ Lombroso's theories attracted a wide following during the late 1800s, as European and American social scientists struggled to account for the seeming explosion of crime, mental illness, mental retardation, and poverty afflicting modern society. Civilization was evolving so rapidly from an agrarian to an industrial lifestyle, they reasoned, that an increasing number of people were hereditarily unable to keep up.

Industrialization and urbanization transformed western Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth century. Manufacturing boomed and people crowded into the cities. Social Darwinism sanctioned cutthroat competition in business and disparaged government efforts to help the needy. "They have no work, you say," Spencer mocked those pleading on behalf of London's growing underclass. "Say rather

that they either refuse work or quickly turn themselves out of it. They are simply good-for-nothings, who in one way or other live on the good-for-somethings."¹⁸ The advances of civilized life had allowed the unfit to survive and multiply, he claimed, so that they threatened to swamp those responsible for creating modern civilization. To rectify the situation, Spencer urged government to stop interfering in economic and social affairs. Regulation slowed progress, he claimed, while public-health and welfare programs harmed people in the long run by preserving and multiplying the unfit.

Social Darwinism had its advocates throughout the Western world. Espousing the motto "root, hog, or die," for example, American political economist William Graham Sumner characterized competition as "the iron spur which has driven the race on to all which it has ever achieved." Neither public welfare nor private charity should restrain the natural struggle for existence, he stressed in an 1881 essay: "The law of the survival of the fittest was not made by man and cannot be abrogated by man. We can only, by interfering with it, produce the survival of the unfittest."¹⁹ Darwin's translator, Clémence Royer, made similar arguments in her long preface to the French edition of *Origin of Species* and in her 1870 book, *The Origin of Man and Societies*.

Social Darwinism influenced popular culture, as well. Gilded Age capitalists such as John D. Rockefeller and James J. Hill publicly justified their monopolistic business practices in survival-of-the-fittest terms. Opponents of public-health and welfare programs drew on Social Darwinist thinking to claim that personal freedom demanded nothing less than an end to social legislation—leading U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes to complain bitterly, "The Fourteenth Amendment [of the federal Constitution] does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*." Holmes wrote these words in a dissenting opinion, however. The court's ma-

majority in that landmark case, *Lockner v. New York*, applied Social Darwinian reasoning to strike down a state worker-protection statute.²⁰ Countless writers, musicians, and other artists played with Social Darwinian themes in their compositions: Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Richard Wagner offer familiar examples. A classic literary scenario involved four shipwrecked persons aboard a lifeboat in Stephen Crane's highly popular 1897 story "The Open Boat," in which the writer explored the character traits best fitting humans for survival in the clutches of nature's indifference, with brute strength losing out in the end.

While not all evolutionists accepted Social Darwinism, many Social Darwinists invoked evolutionary science to support their economic and social views. Historians rightly question the extent to which a strictly Darwinian theory of evolution informed this social discourse, but surely evolutionary naturalism and selectionism underlay much of it.

Although Darwin stressed the formative role of competition among individuals in his theory of evolution, this was but one field of battle for many late-nineteenth-century Social Darwinians. Some of them, such as Haeckel in Germany and Georges Vacher de Lapouge in France, saw competition among races or nations as more crucial for human evolution than any residual forms of interpersonal competition. Whereas Spencer's emphasis on individual competition tended to minimize the state's role in society, Haeckel's stress on racial and national competition tended to maximize it. Social Darwinism had many faces. Just when some Social Darwinists called for less government interference in domestic affairs, others championed imperialism, colonialism, and militarism in foreign affairs. Both scientific racism and militant nationalism became hallmarks of Social Darwinism, and it made little practical difference whether their proponents believed in a Lamarckian or

Darwinian theory of evolution: Either could justify racism or nationalism for persons already so inclined.

Racism predated Social Darwinism, of course, but for many Social Darwinists, the theory of evolution seemed to support their sense of racial superiority. Many Lamarckians saw the various human races as representing different stages of linear biological development, with the taxonomic status of each reflected in its relative cultural attainments. Befitting his Lamarckian orientation, Spencer not only believed in a biologically based hierarchy of races, but thought that all individuals, as they matured, recapitulated the evolutionary history of their race. "During early years every civilized man passes through that phase of character exhibited by the barbarous race from which he is descended," he explained. "Hence the tendencies to cruelty, to thieving, to lying, so general among children."²¹ Haeckel, too, with his Lamarckian perspective, subdivided humanity into an intricate hierarchy of evolving races and species, with "the Germanic race, in North-western Europe and in North America," on top.²² Social Darwinists in the United States, such as Sumner and the noted Lamarckian geologist Joseph LeConte, drew on such views to justify the continued political subjugation of blacks in the post-Civil War South. "The Negro race is still in childhood," the Georgia-born LeConte opined in 1892; "it has not yet learned to walk alone in the paths of civilization."²³

Despite Darwin's view of evolution as branching rather than linear, with nothing inherently progressive about it, most Darwinian scientists joined their Lamarckian counterparts in positing a single line of human development. Some white ethnic subgroup blossomed at the end of this long, solitary branch, they inevitably concluded, whose supposed superiority they typically attributed to the invigorating challenge of surviving in a cold climate. "Extinction follows chiefly from the competition of tribe with tribe, and race with race," Dar-

win wrote in *Descent of Man*. "When civilized nations come into contact with barbarians the struggle is short, except where a deadly climate gives its aid to the native race."²⁴ Lapouge was less sanguine than Darwin about which races would prevail in the ongoing struggle for existence. An anthropologist without standing in his own country but with an influential following in Germany and the United States, Lapouge compulsively calibrated racial hierarchies based on skull shape, but worried obsessively that inferior, round-headed races might overrun his superior, long-headed "Aryan" race. "Evolution takes place all around us," he explained in his 1899 book, *L'Aryen*. "It does not indefinitely lead toward the better, it leads toward nothing."²⁵ Such worries, carried to the extreme by a small corps of radical evolutionists, fed a racist variant of eugenics that advocated government policies of ethnic exclusion or elimination.

Although it made little sense from a biological perspective, some Social Darwinists called for militaristic competition among nations. Darwin, Spencer, and even Lapouge vehemently disagreed, fearing that war weakened a civilized society by killing its ablest young men. Nevertheless, Haeckel advocated a strong, unified Germany to dominate the world. "Nowhere in nature," he wrote in his popular 1868 *History of Creation*, "does that idyllic peace exist, of which poets sing; we find everywhere a struggle and a striving to annihilate neighbours and competitors." Thus, he stressed, "the whole history of nations . . . must therefore be explicable by means of *natural selection*. Passion and selfishness—conscious or unconscious—is everywhere the motive force of life."²⁶ This Social Darwinian vision of national progress fed German militarism leading up to World War One. During that bloody conflict, American evolutionary zoologist Vernon Kellogg, then on a failed peace mission to Europe, concluded that a "Neo-Darwinian struggle-for-existence" mindset propelled the intellectual elite of the

German officers' corps.²⁷ It was a profoundly disquieting discovery for Kellogg, and one that soon helped to launch a popular crusade against evolutionary biology in the United States.

Nationalistic competition, like racial competition, dovetailed with the eugenics movement, which gained momentum following the rediscovery of Mendel's laws in 1900. Eugenics quickly became the focal point of applied human evolution, and remained so at least until the 1930s. It took two complementary forms, positive eugenics (or "more children from the fit") and negative eugenics (or "less [children] from the unfit").²⁸ The former was typically voluntary; the latter became increasingly compulsory.