

Social Darwinism: Its emergence and use to justify Imperialism, Racism, and Conservative Economic / Social Policies

Vocabulary Terms:

Social Darwinism: a theory used to justify the superiority of certain races and nations, namely whites and Europeans. Based on Darwin's theory of evolution.

Imperialism: the expansion of a nation into an empire by conquering territories that are both contiguous (US Frontier) or separated from the 'mother' country by political or geographic boundaries (Alaska, Hawaii). Similar to **colonialism**.

Overview

Social Darwinism was a sociological theory popular in late nineteenth-century Europe and the United States. It merged Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and Herbert Spencer's sociological theories to justify imperialism, racism, and laissez-faire (i.e. conservative) social and economic policies. Social Darwinists argued that individuals and groups, just like plants and animals, competed with one another for success in life. They used this belief to justify the status quo by claiming that the individuals or groups at the top of the social, economic, or political hierarchies belonged there, because they had competed against others and had proven themselves best adapted. Any social or political intervention that weakened the existing hierarchy, they argued, would undermine the natural order. The "individuals" at the top of the hierarchy were white nations (US, England, France), Asian nations (Japan, China), and Hispanic nations (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina). Blacks were ranked lower because they had not as groups achieved nation status (all African countries except two were controlled by European countries) and indigenous natives, such as Native Americans, Inuits, or Australian Aborigines, were ranked at the bottom of the social darwinist hierarchy because they had lost their homelands to conquest by Europeans. Their consequent death rates from disease and war proved further justification of this to social darwinists.

Background

Darwin's theory of natural selection and the subsequent arguments by social Darwinists were based heavily on the work of Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), an early nineteenth-century British clergyman who wrote *Principles of Population*. Malthus predicted that food resources were limited while human populations, unchecked by war, disease, or famine, increased faster than food supplies. The disparity between resources and population meant a constant struggle among members of a given population for these limited resources. Darwin (1809-1882) applied the Malthusian principle to the natural world and posited his theory of natural selection. In *Origin of Species* (1859) he argued

that the scarcity of natural resources led to competition among individuals, which he called "the struggle for survival." Through this competition, the best-adapted members of a given population were most likely to be successful, reproduce, and pass their beneficial adaptations on to their offspring. Poorly adapted members, he asserted, probably would not survive and therefore would not pass their lower quality traits to the next generation. This evolution was eventually termed "survival of the fittest."

Darwin's original theory on evolution and natural selection had four major parts:

- 1.) The resources of an environment are limited. Creatures produce more offspring than can possibly survive. Members of a species must compete for limited resources and for survival.
- 2.) No two members of a species are exactly alike. Each organism contains an individual combination of inherited traits. Some traits are useful for survival; other traits are not.
- 3.) Organisms that have useful traits reproduce in greater numbers. Their offspring inherit the traits. Organisms with unfavorable traits eventually die off. The fittest survive.
- 4.) Nature selects or favors different traits at different times. Varieties within a species gradually create a new species. Some species can dominate in certain times, but become extinct later on.

Social Darwinists argued on the basis of Darwin's theory of natural selection that the best adapted humans naturally rose to the top of social, political, and economic worlds. Therefore, they argued, those members at the top of society, either by virtue of hard work or by birth, were the best-adapted citizens. They used this rationale to argue against welfare policies that would help the poor by redistributing resources from the most fit members to the least fit, which they claimed would violate the natural order and allow the perpetuation of less fit members. Darwin himself did not promote social Darwinism and probably would have opposed many of the claims of social Darwinists.

Social Darwinism was the product of late nineteenth-century economic and political expansion. As the European and American upper class sought to extend its economic and political power, it employed scientific explanations to justify the increasingly obvious gap between rich and poor. The social Darwinists' reliance on natural laws allowed social, political, and scientific leaders to dismiss those who sought to redistribute wealth and power by claiming that reformers were violating the natural hierarchy. By extending their arguments to address entire nations, some social Darwinists justified imperialism on the basis that the imperial powers were naturally superior and their control over other nations was in the best interest of human evolution. The increasing public interest and respect for the sciences also contributed to the success of social Darwinism, as policies that had the stamp of scientific legitimacy were accepted as above political interest or influence. Many Europeans used this to justify their occupation and conquest of Africa. They said that it was the "White Man's Burden" to civilize and educate the African population, which they deemed as backwards and uncivilized. (It is important to note, however, that social darwinism has no scientific or genetic proof).

Impact

While Darwin coined the term "struggle for survival," it was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who invented and popularized the concept of "survival of the fittest," and Spencer is widely considered the chief proponent of social Darwinism. Originally trained as an engineer, Spencer developed an increasing interest in the natural and social sciences and proposed theories that linked them under the umbrella of evolution. He believed that biological evolution had brought about human intellect, which in turn produced society. Therefore, he argued, human intellect and social activities were products of biological evolution, and all three operated on natural laws. His work was a clear reflection of the English Industrial Revolution, which was dedicated to promoting competition, exploitation, and struggle in the human social realm. He asserted that all aspects of life, be it human, plant, or animal life, were guided by the constant struggle in which the weak were subjugated by the strong. Spencer argued that it was the natural order of things and could not be altered by charity welfare policies, or legislative actions. Because survival was based on competition, Spencer saw it only as natural to see some individuals in society emerge as rich, prosperous, and wealthy, while others were working class poor that would either survive in hopes that their children move up the social hierarchy, or they would die (an example of not being 'fit' enough to survive).

Spencer was well known in Europe, but he was especially popular in the United States because his work provided Americans with a scientific justification for free competition, which was widely recognized as the most effective path to economic progress. Between the 1860s and 1900, Americans purchased more than 350,000 copies of Spencer's books. In 1882 Spencer arrived in the United States for a widely publicized tour that brought together American writers, scientists, politicians, theologians, and businessmen around the doctrines of social Darwinism.

William Graham Sumner (1840-1910), a Yale sociologist, was another prominent American social Darwinist. In *What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, Sumner argued against governmental and private charity attempts to improve the conditions of the lower classes. Like Spencer, Sumner believed that society evolved and operated in a deterministic fashion and any attempt to alter social hierarchies was doomed to failure. Using his authority as a scientist, Sumner legitimated aggressive competitive practices of American businessmen by declaring their activities to be the source of human evolutionary progress.

The best known American opponent of social Darwinism was Lester Ward (1841-1913), a paleontologist and one of the founders of sociology in America. Ward argued against the social Darwinists' natural justifications for the status quo and posited the theory of *telesis*, or planned social evolution. While social Darwinists focused on the role of competition in the natural and social worlds, Ward highlighted the importance of cooperation and marshaled historical evidence against Sumner to argue that human progress was the product of cooperative activities and intelligence, not merciless competition. For example, the African slaves in America were enslaved not because

they could not compete with white men, but because they were a minority in society, outnumbered nearly 5 to 1. It was a cooperative effort by the white citizens to keep the blacks oppressed and in servitude that allowed for their continued enslavement. He used this analysis to urge social and political leaders to adopt measures deliberately aimed at social improvement.

By the turn of the century social Darwinists were attacked and their credibility undermined by reform Darwinists, who used the same scientific theories about the natural world to uphold opposite conclusions about society. Reform Darwinists asserted that the scientific knowledge of evolution allowed social and political leaders to intervene in the natural order to better the human condition. Using Darwin's theory of natural selection and Gregor Mendel's recently rediscovered theories of inheritance, reform Darwinists argued that humans could control their own evolutionary destiny by adopting interventionist policies such as public sanitation or health care, which increased people's life expectancy and thus their chance at survival.

Whatever the case, the United States used the theory of social Darwinism to justify their expansion and imperialist policies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their conquest of Alaska, Hawaii, South America, and the Pacific Islands were necessary because as a white nation they had a responsibility to 'civilize' lesser nations. Their conquest of each area could be justified by their superior standing in the racial hierarchy. However, these explanations often concealed the true intent of such conquest, namely economic gain (trade routes), strategic military reasons (bases), and exploitation of the natural resources found in each place of conquest.

Questions

- 1.) What is social Darwinism? Please explain how it works beyond just the definition.
- 2.) How was social Darwinism used in American society?
- 3.) Create a T-Chart comparing the arguments and evidence for/against the theory of social darwinism.

Example:

Supporting Evidence	Rejecting Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- European conquest of Native Americans and their lands- Enslavement of blacks in US	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Natives died mostly of diseases that also killed many Europeans- Blacks enslaved occurs only because they are a minority in US

- 4.) Next, use your T-Chart to create a persuasive argument that either supports or rejects the theory of social darwinism. Be sure to include the impacts that accompany the use of this theory. Your response should be roughly **2-4 paragraphs** in length.