

Social Darwinism in American Thought

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INTRODUCTION

Darwinism was used to stabilize people against hardships when folks wanted to accept some hasty reform.

5 The most prominent critics, (Ward, pragmatists) sought to wrest Darwin from the Social Darwinists (SD)

6 – SD buttressed conservatism.

It meant survival of the fittest and suggested competition would lead to improvement.

7 – Here it is interesting as it is a secular / progressive conservatism.

8 – Whereas Burke is religious and intuitive, Sumner is secularist and rational.

9 – But many conservative old values folks are on the left: Jefferson saving agrarianism; Jacksonians wanting simplicity; populists and progressives trying to restore popular democracy.

It is secular, but pious of morals and a kind of naturalistic Calvinism.

11 – Sumner was odd as he also opposed the protective tariff and denounced the Spanish – American War.

CHAPTER 1 – THE COMING OF DARWINISM

13 – The Origin of Species caused a furor in England, but not in the US. It was released in 1860 as the Civil War was coming, thus monopolizing peoples' attention.

14 – After the Civil War interest in Darwinism rose as did biblical criticism.

John Fiske helped interest people in Darwin.

17 – Only Louis Agassiz refused to accept Darwinism.

18 – And Asa Gray found himself the leader of American scientific opinion.

19- Harvard and other universities embraced Darwin.

20 – William James used Spencer's Principles of Psychology as a textbook. No one raised an eye.

21 – In 1876 The Johns Hopkins University was founded to start research – free of religious denomination.

24 – The Atlantic Monthly and The Nation promoted Darwinism.

25 – But the persistence of fundamentalism into the 20th century is a token of the incompleteness of the Darwinian conquest.

The 1871 appearance of the Descent of Man helped to fuel clerical wrath. Human dignity was under fire.

28 – The Origin displaced the creator.

29 – The most powerful pulpit in the US was that of Henry Ward Beecher. He was converted to Darwinism. Abbott and he replaced biblical with evolutionary sin wherein immoral acts were a lapse into our animal nature.

30 – This move removed the taint of sin from God and put it on nature.

Beecher told his congregation that the “moral structure of the human mind is such that it must have religion.” When this clerical leader gave assent all of the Gilded age had finally agreed.

CHAPTER 2 – THE VOGUE OF SPENCER

31 – Beecher wrote and admired Spencer. Why? Well, it “offered a comprehensive world-view, uniting under one generalization everything in nature from protozoa to politics.” This helped it replace the Mosaic cosmogony.

32 – Spencer’s 1860 Synthetic Philosophy was to most of his contemporaries in America a giant figure in the history of thought. Now it is just seen as a flicker between transcendentalism and pragmatism.

33 – Americans funded the writing of some of Spencer’s work. It was huge from 1870 – 1890.

35 – Spencer’s philosophy came out of English industrialism. He was trained as a civil engineer. The idea of the conservation of energy permeated his work. Born in 1820 his non-conformist family can be blamed for his hate of state power. He was on the staff of the Economist.

36 – Spencer, invoking thermodynamics also called the conservation of energy, the persistence of force; this resulted in evolution and dissolution. Evolution is integration, dissolution, disintegration. Life goes from incoherent homogeneity to coherent heterogeneity.

37 - Anything which is homogeneous is inherently unstable; thus it will give way to heterogeneity. This is mirrored in the growth from the mass of similar human cells to the heterogeneity of the human mind, and the progress of societies toward integrated diversity (my own words).

The ultimate result should be one of equilibrium or equilibration. This happens when the limit of heterogeneity has been reached.

There is a rhythm in life, so evolution goes to disintegration. But societies can put this off.

Rather than purely positivistic, Spencer writes of The Unknowable as deity.

39 – Darwin, Spencer and Wallace wrote under the pressure of Malthus. Spencer saw survival of the fittest working on humans, but failed to extend it to the whole human race. Spencer never disregarded his Lamarckism, even when all science turned against it.

40 – Unlike Bentham, Spencer enshrined freedom. Through hell, this would lead to “the ultimate development of the ideal man.” It will unfold as surely as a flower does.

41 – Rather than impede development, Spencer repudiated all aid to the unfit.

If you lose your life because of stupidity, vice, or idleness, it is just like you had malformed limbs. Under nature’s laws all alike are put on trial.

He was, though, not against voluntary private charity because it had an elevating effect on the character of the donors. He only refused state measures.

42 – Whereas society was originally organized for military conquest, the larger and larger areas of control conquest creates lead to internal peace and applications to industrial arts replacing military endeavors.

43 – State regulation and distribution is more like military organization and could spell death to society; it would penalize the superior citizens and their offspring in favor of the inferior. Thus such a society would be outstripped by others.

44 – The theory of society works as a social lubricant for progress, not a motive.

Businessmen liked Darwinism. John D. Rockefeller loved it. Carnegie told Spencer how he was troubled and perplexed over the collapse of Christian philosophy until Darwin and Spencer saved him.

His philosophy was inherently anti-union.

48 – Spencer’s popularity peaked in 1882 when he visited the US.

49 – The rise of critical reformism in sociology diminished Spencer’s clout. He lived until 1903, and thus well beyond his influence.

50 – Spencer worked because of our history of individualism. But, the industrial age turned people to big forces and against Spencer.

CHAPTER 3 – WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER: SOCIAL DARWINIST

51 – Sumner’s work synthesized the Protestant ethic, the doctrines of classical economics and Darwinian natural selection.

52 – He called the savings-bank depositor “a hero of civilization.”

53 – Sumner had a wider following than any other teacher in Yale’s history.

54 - He said, “There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living.”

55 – Sumner went to Malthus for first principles.

56 – He said where land is plentiful, the struggle for existence is less savage and democracy is likely to flourish. Capital, elsewhere he said, is only formed by self-denial.

57 – The only alternative to survival of the fittest is survival of the unfittest. Competition is nature’s law, which can no more be gotten rid of than the law of gravitation.

58 – Any attack on inheritance would attack the family and end by reducing men to “swine.”

Millionaires are the bloom of a competitive system.

59 – social evolution negated the traditional American ideology of equality and natural rights. In the evolutionary perspective, equality was ridiculous and there were no rights in the jungle.

60 - He was even skeptical about democracy. He understood the historical theme that the Founders feared democracy and the people fought for more.

61 – In *The Study of Sociology* Sumner argued that government was unaware of natural law and so thought all artificial and amenable to their meddling. Spencer would dissolve this ignorance.

He wrote, “Let every man be sober, industrious, prudent, and wise, and bring up his children to be likewise, and poverty will be abolished in a few generations.”

62 – Government’s two concerns, the property of men and the honor of women. He thought trade unions okay as they tested the water of prices and uplifted the esprit of labor.

63 – He wrote an article called, “Protectionism, The Ism That Teaches That Waste Makes Wealth.”

He was hated by both sides. The hero of most of his books were “The Forgotten Man” who went about his business quietly, as Sumner’s father had.

66 – Like a later-day Calvin, Sumner came to preach the predestination of the social order and the salvation of the economically elect via the survival of the fittest.

CHAPTER 4 – LESTER WARD: CRITIC

67 – Comte and Spencer both sought a sort of concilience (sans the word) wherein they arranged all subject matter from natural sciences to social sciences with sociology at the top. Comte wrote of “The obvious necessity of founding sociology upon the whole of biology.”

68 – Ward wrote, “I naturally consider everything in its relation to the Cosmos.” He wrote of his Pure Sociology, “It is more than sociology, it is cosmology.” Dynamic Sociology starts with 200 pages of physics and chemistry, astronomy, biology, and embryology before the sociology.

Of importance to all of Ward’s work, however, is a disjuncture between the physical, animal, purposeless evolution and mental human evolution being acted on purposefully.

Born in 1841, in 1883 he became the chief paleontologist of the US Geological Survey and published Dynamic Sociology (the product of 14 years of work).

It sold very slowly. But by 1906 he was elected head of the American Sociological Society (ASS).

71 – Ward felt the sting of the classism of social Darwinism, being raised lower-class. This offended his democratic sensibilities. He also worked for the government and so didn’t distrust the government so much.

72 – Laissez-faire and natural law had been useful when society was trying to free itself from monarchies.

73 – There is no equation between nature and human well being nor can it protect us from monopoly.

“It is only through the artificial control of natural phenomena that science is made to minister to human needs; and if social laws are really analogous to physical laws, there is no reason why social science may not receive practical applications such as have been given to physical science.”

74 – By human standards nature herself is uneconomical. He distinguished “Telic” phenomena (those governed by human will) and blind natural forces. There are also two kinds of economics – the animal economics of life and the human economics of mind.

Domesticated crops and animals produce more. This is the creation of the fittest.

76 – Ward praised feeling; reason was only created to guide feeling. The social intellect is made of a collection of social feelings. And intellect can become capable of guiding social as well as individual growth.

People had to be readied for this dynamic guidance by education.

Education would also get to people's untapped potential.

77 – In The Forum in 1891 he wrote an article on the transmission of culture. He wondered how talents could run in families that had no survival value – such as artistic ability. But, he wanted Lamarckian truth so that we could have longer benefits from education.

78 – He saw society coming from conquest but evolving to homogenous people with patriotism.

He was not so optimistic as Spencer or pessimistic as Ricardo – Malthus. Malthus does not apply to humans.

79 – “The fundamental principle of biology is natural selection, that of sociology is artificial selection. The survival of the fittest is simply the survival of the strong, which implies and would better be called the destruction of the weak. If nature progresses through the destruction of the weak, man progresses through the protection of the weak.”

He noted that Sumner was not a biologist. “Fitness to survive is something wholly distinct from real superiority.”

80 – Ward attacks Spencer and notes his inconsistency of using an organic model because that leads to integration and all under government control.

81 – Applying Darwinism “accidental” change banishes all teleology from the world. If there is no cosmic purpose, there is at least human purpose: man has a special place in nature and should guide himself intelligently.

82 – Ward called elimination of the unfittest the most oligarchic view ever which would focus all the world's attention on an infinitesimal fraction of humans.

83 – Whereas socialism seeks to create artificial equalities, sociocracy would recognize inequalities that are natural. A sociocratic world would distribute favors according to merit, but equalize opportunity. It would reign in those with anti-social cunning.

84 – Ward believed so much in human guidance, that his use of physics and biology seemed an odd addition.

CHAPTER 5 – EVOLUTION, ETHICS, and SOCIETY

85 – The age of Spencer, Ward and Sumner was insecure: Religion on the ropes, struggle and Malthus in the air. Men with a taste for traditional ideas hoped for more. Our nation was Christian, not Nietzschean.

87 – Under Spencer’s regime, there was nothing to keep the stronger races from preying on the weaker. Did Darwin justify disregarding the suffering of the poor?

89 – This argument happened during a deluge of questionable immigrants. It was the scientific party versus the sympathetic party.

90 – Scientifically, war killed the strong and protected the weak (who stayed at home). It would be better to rely on education to choose the best, which requires comfort, which requires control of reproduction.

Darwin himself only offered confused guidance on the moral import and social implications of his work. He thought those who could not afford kids shouldn’t, but those who were rich should have lots.

He did devote a lot of the Descent to morals and human sociality.

92 – “Selfish and contentious people will not cohere. And without coherence nothing can be effected.” He thought morals came from man’s social instincts.

Bagehot tried to recapitulate the growth of political civilization in the terms of evolution. Early on politics created a “cake of custom” to bind men together. This created status that only later got organized by contract and then led to molding national character.

93 – Progress requires variety, but not so much that it chokes out progress.

John Fiske (Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy 1874, and The Meaning of Infancy, 1883) wrote of the roots of our social nature in our long gestation. The necessity of mother’s connection required love. The moral sense of society comes from this initial family bond. [Yes, but lateral learning comes to disrupt it].

95 – Huxley argued that the fittest weren’t the best. And, fit organisms, being more of them, must be best. Jungle struggle weakens bonds holding society together.

He joked that those who adhere to survival of the fittest as good must hate medicine. And, only a small amount of people in society are actually in a life or death struggle. Most are in the struggle for enjoyment.

97 – Kropotkin’s 1902 Mutual Aid found cooperation throughout the animal kingdoms. They all live in groups. They don’t compete fiercely within their groups.

Minorities will never agree on exterminating the poor. They know that they should abolish competition and establish equality for all.

100 – Religion Benjamin Kidd argued existed to counterbalance the harshness of nature and individual self-interest and creates cohesion and altruism. As such, it performs an important and necessary function.

102 – William Mallock said we needed to be more specific than “mankind.” In his book *Aristocracy and Evolution* he spoke of the contributions of the great man. Here comes progress and longer lives, not the incremental breeding of the struggling masses.

103 – We needed competition between leaders more than between workers.

The overall trend was from individualism to group selection, bonds, “solidarism.” They spoke, in the social gospel, of social salvation (though some put some stock in the importance of individual behavior to society).

CHAPTER 6 – THE DISSENTERS

105 - Dissent against the merits of a free competitive order grew after the 1890s.

106 – Ministers worried about the poor and that they were out of touch with the working class.

107 – George Herron’s “Applied Christianity” was of this ilk, as was Josiah Strong’s *Our Country* – a best seller in the 1880s.

110 – Herron said the sermon on the mount was “the science of society.”

112 – Inequality was sewing the seeds of social destruction.

113 – The nationalist movement sprung up after the publication of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. The hero woke up in 2000 and found perfect cooperation.

114 – Competition created the survival of the unfittest, not in that the rich were not fit, but that competition encouraged their worst behavior and attitudes.

115 – Marx and Darwin sat comfortably next to each other in socialist bookstores. These writers often blamed Spencer’s idea of slow progress as discouraging socialist revolution.

117 - But societies, they said, evolved slowly and then in fast spurts. These writers added nothing new. And they hated biology when it went against them, but then comfortably used it for their arguments.

120 – 1904 to 1914 was the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and this near killed advocacy of Laissez Faire. Ward was winning and Sumner losing.

CHAPTER 7 – THE CURRENT OF PRAGMATISM

123 – In the first two decades of the 20th century, pragmatism reigned supreme. Spencer argued for the automatic and inevitable; pragmatism, possibilities.

124 – They moved from Spencer's (and history's) fixed metaphysics to experiment.

125 – They too drifted from the individualistic to the collective.

126 – Chauncey Wright (1830 to 75) led the Metaphysical Club and debunked the popular notion of Spencer as a positivist. He was a second-rate metaphysician.

128 – James used Spencer's textbook, but asked students to attack it. James said that Spencer's mind was "so fatally lacking in geniality, humor, picturesqueness, and poetry; and so explicit, so mechanical, so flat in the panorama which it gives to life." All parts of his work were "the same noontday glare," with no "mysteries or shadows."

130 – James rejected Spencer's determinism, because it robbed moral judgment of its effectiveness. For moral judgments to be effective, there must be some uncertainty in the world.

131 – Furthermore, the idea that mind ministers only to survival cannot explain the full range of higher cultural activities.

133 – Spencer's impersonal view was seen as a brand of oriental fatalism. It ignored spontaneous variations in people; we have to include idiosyncrasies that allow for greatness.

134 – James liked E. L. Godkin.

138 – Dewey attacked Kidd. He thought the idea of sacrificing the individual for the progress of society got the means and ends backwards.

139 – Whereas Huxley treated nature as something foreign in his gardener of society analogy, Dewey saw man as within the natural system.

141 – Dewey's pragmatism was always more socially oriented than the uber individualist James.

CHAPTER 8 – TRENDS IN SOCIAL THEORY, 1890 – 1915

143 – Evolution had a profound impact on psychology, ethnology, sociology, and ethics. But not so much on economics.

Economics had always just celebrated the competitive regime of property and individual rights.

144 – Classical economics already had its own doctrine of social selection. It dovetailed nicely with natural law.

145 – Rev. Francis Wayland's *The Elements of Political Economy* was a popular economics textbook. Self-help, not state intervention, was the way to economic salvation.

149 – Patten put biology in economic theory. He looked at the effect of the environment on progress. Changing environs make for progress. We need to keep changing the environment, even if not geographically.

150 – Patten said we had passed from a motor economy to a sensory economy, a pleasure economy. This will send us to a new social order where new social instincts are needed. But in the pleasure economy, many will succumb to temptation and die off. A truly superior race, able to resist temptation, will appear.

151 – Thomas Nixon Carver thought group struggle was the most important, but that the individual struggle fueled it. Thus he kept individualism in economic thought. In *The Religion Worth Having* he said "The best religion is that which acts most powerfully as a spur to energy and directs that energy most productively." Moreover, "The religion that best fits people for the struggle to survive will be left in possession of the world."

152 – Thorstein Veblen attacked Sumner's idea that the richest were the fittest. And he criticized classical economics in the light of evolutionary science. He largely thought of the business class as a predatory class.

154 – Veblen said that, rather than just justify the overall economy, post – evolutionary economics should provide a theory of cultural growth as determined by the economic interests and the progress of economic institutions.

Whereas economics only changed a little, sociology changed a lot between 1890 and 1915. People either followed Ward or Sumner.

Albert Galloway Kellor was Sumner's chief disciple. He too was skeptical about wholesale change in society and believed in a sort of determinism.

157 – Giddings, at Columbia, kept with the Spencerian concepts of differentiation and equilibrium and cosmic concepts after all others abandoned them. He was into the "consciousness of kind." So he took sociology as psychological. Social organization is a mental state, not biological.

Yet, he drew upon biology to establish the idea of a natural aristocracy. Even though **sociology progressively drifted away from biology as a source of understanding** and towards psychology.

159 – But the sort of psychology looked at was more of the Dewey / James sort than the Ward or even Spencer; they were both very pleasure / pain oriented. The new view of Dewey and Veblen saw a whole man, with propensities, interests, and habits.

And the new psychology was social psychology. It looked at the interdependence of the individual personality with that of the institutional structure of society.

160 – Thus Dewey said we needed to work on institutions, not just the hearts of men. And, this brand of sociology dovetailed with progressivism.

161 – Social Darwinism also got revised by Eugenics folks. It proved to be the most enduring aspect of SD.

162 – By 1915 twelve states had sterilization laws. People worried that the new immigration was lowering our standards of intelligence.

164 – They differed from earlier SDs because they weren't Laissez Faire. Smart men will always succeed. It is not the strength of the strong, but the weakness of the weak that creates exploitation.

165 – Compulsory schooling will make kids expensive rather than an economic asset and so reduces procreation. Trade unions could also penalize the rich and reward the dysgenic.

166 – Ward and others who moved towards cultural analysis attacked the genetics movement.

167 – Eugenics accepted state action and a social view over the individual view. The social view and dedication to empirical research – if not sterilization – characterized this 1900 – 1915 cohort. But they were a varied lot – including Boas, Turner, Dewey, Brandeis, and Veblen.

CHAPTER 9 – RACISM AND IMPERIALISM

170 – Darwinism was also used to justify the Spanish – American war. This sort of thought was not new. Manifest Destiny had such a ring. But it used Aryanism.

172 – Anglo-Saxonism was an outgrowth of romanticism and nationalism, rather than biological science. And this Anglo-Saxonism was the leading justification for imperialism after 1885.

173 – Anglo's domination seemed to prove it was the fittest.

174 – James Hosmer’s history traced our republic to Anglo-Saxon roots. John Burgess put this Anglo tilt on our law and political systems. Roosevelt was his student. Teddy drew on this in his *Winning of the West*.

176 – Fiske’s *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* blended this Teutonic vision with Spencer like understanding. So the Teutonic race had spread and brought peace and industry in competition with other groups. He saw Anglos as out populating and dominating the world.

178 – His book was of but small influence compared to Josiah Strong’s *Our Country*.

182 – Rather than violent, these folks generally thought Anglo domination would usher in a period of universal peace and progress.

183 – Naval Admiral Mahan sought an Anglo alliance based on a patriotism of race as well as nation. But many in America, differing ethnically, found such Anglo talk offensive.

184 – Most of such writers thought militarism really primitive. They did realize preparedness would best prevent war.

185 – But on winning he war we were not militaristic and not so confident. Our comfort and the fertility of lower races were dangerous.

189 – T. Roosevelt was the spokesperson against race decline and decadence. We needed 4 children per family. The sensational press made war scares like that against Japan.

191 – Our failure to be militant and our allowing the individual to take precedence over the group was also dangerous. Hiram Maxim created the Maxim gun and wrote *Defenseless America* in 1914.

193 – In 1894 Boas became an anthropology leader and started saying that historical circumstances, not race, led Anglos to domination.

194 – Anti-imperialists argued that we would have to mix with alien races and languages if we expanded. Expansion also went against consent of the governed.

James was a fervent anti-imperialist. Sumner too. Jordan told us that war is a biological evil, not a biological boon. It is Dysgenic.

196 – We entered WW I in the name of anti-militarism. We fought those who embraced Darwinian machtpolitik. We fought Nietzsche.

CHAPTER 10 – CONCLUSION

201 – James said our focus on survival undermined our focus on excellence. But until the 1890s rugged individualism came from Darwinism. It went along with the tooth and claw version of social reality. The Middle Class dreamed of conquest. And we saw the business dominance as the way to strength in a competitive world.

202 – While Darwinian individualism declined, Darwinian collectivism of the nationalist and racist variety began to take hold. These dogmas worked until revulsion at WW I swept them away. Only our enemy was racist and imperialist and aggressive and Darwinist.

204 – We now all accept that biological ideas of survival of the fittest are useless in understanding society; and while we are biological, we are so only incidentally, we must explain all in cultural terms. Our social organization makes our well being, not the reverse. And, finally, there is nothing in naturalistic philosophy of life that discourages the acceptance of moral sanctions for the common good.