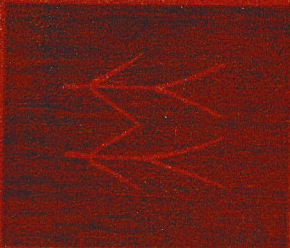


Social Darwinism in American Thought

By Richard Hofstadter

Completely revised, 1965



This book goes to the root of the massive struggle between the Welfare State and Rugged Individualism, growing out of Darwin's theory of the Survival of the Fittest. By the author of *The American Political Tradition*.

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Introduction

Periodically in modern history scientists have set forth new theories whose consequences go far beyond the internal development of science as a system of knowledge and far beyond such practical applications as they may happen to have. Discoveries of this magnitude shatter old beliefs and philosophies; they suggest (indeed often impose) the necessity of building new ones. They raise the promise — to some men infinitely alluring — of new and more complete systematizations of knowledge. They command so much interest and acquire so much prestige within the literate community that almost everyone feels obliged at the very least to bring his world-outlook into harmony with their findings, while some thinkers eagerly seize upon and enlist them in the formulation and propagation of their own views on subjects quite remote from science.

The first such episode in modern times, the formulation of the Copernican system, required a major revision of cosmologies and opened up to learned men the fascinating and terrifying prospect that many long-received ideas about the world might have to be drastically revised. Once again, in the Newtonian and post-Newtonian eras, mechanical models of explanation began to be widely applied to the theory of man and to political philosophy, and the ideal of a science of man and of society took on new significance. Darwinism established a new approach to nature and gave fresh impetus to the conception of development; it impelled men to try to exploit its findings and methods for the understanding of society through schemes of evolutionary development and organic analogies. In our own time the work of Freud, whose insights originated and have their surest value in the sphere of clinical psychology and in the treatment of neuroses, has

begun to be exploited in sociology and art, politics and religion.

Almost everywhere in western civilization, though in varying degrees according to intellectual traditions and personal temperaments, thinkers of the Darwinian era seized upon the new theory and attempted to sound its meaning for the several social disciplines. Anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political theorists, economists were set to pondering what, if anything, Darwinian concepts meant for their own disciplines. And if a great many intellectual gaucheries were committed in the course of this search for the consequences of Darwinism (as I believe there were), they were gaucheries to which we should be prepared to extend a certain measure of indulgence. The social-Darwinian generation, if we may call it that, was a generation that had to learn to live with and accommodate to startling revelations of possibly sweeping import; and neither the full meaning nor the limits of these revelations could be found until a great many thinkers had groped about, stumbled, and perhaps fallen in the dark.

The subject of this book is the effects of Darwin's work upon social thinking in America. In some respects the United States during the last three decades of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century was *the* Darwinian country. England gave Darwin to the world, but the United States gave to Darwinism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception. Darwin was made an honorary member of the American Philosophical Society in 1869, ten years before his own university, Cambridge, awarded him an honorary degree. American scientists were prompt not only to accept the principle of natural selection but also to make important contributions to evolutionary science. The enlightened American reading public, which became fascinated with evolutionary speculation soon after the Civil War, gave a handsome reception to philosophies and political theories built in part upon Darwinism or associated with it. Herbert Spencer, who of all men made the most ambitious attempt to systematize the implications of evolution in fields other than

biology itself, was far more popular in the United States than he was in his native country.

An age of rapid and striking economic change, the age during which Darwin's and Spencer's ideas were popularized in the United States was also one in which the prevailing political mood was conservative. Challenges to this dominant conservatism were never absent, but the characteristic feeling was that the country had seen enough agitation over political issues in the period before the Civil War, that the time had now come for acquiescence and acquisition, for the development and enjoyment of the great continent that was being settled and the immense new industries that were springing up.

Understandably Darwinism was seized upon as a welcome addition, perhaps the most powerful of all, to the store of ideas to which solid and conservative men appealed when they wished to reconcile their fellows to some of the hardships of life and to prevail upon them not to support hasty and ill-considered reforms. Darwinism was one of the great informing insights in this long phase in the history of the conservative mind in America. It was those who wished to defend the political status quo, above all the *laissez-faire* conservatives, who were first to pick up the instruments of social argument that were forged out of the Darwinian concepts. Only later, only after a style of social thought that can be called "social Darwinism" had taken clear and recognizable form, did the dissenters from this point of view move into the arena with formidable arguments. The most prominent dissenters, especially those like Lester Ward and the pragmatists who directed their criticism most immediately to the philosophical problems raised by social Darwinism, were thinkers who did not quarrel with the fundamental assumption that the new ideas had profound import for the theory of man and of society. They simply attempted to wrest Darwinism from the social Darwinists by showing that its psychological and social consequences could be read in totally different terms from those assumed by the more conservative thinkers who had preceded them in the field. To-

day their arguments seem, if not to everyone superior, at least to most of us an indispensable antidote to the plausible arguments of the men they criticized. But that they succeeded in establishing much of their critique should not lead us to forget that for many long years they represented a minority point of view. And hardly had they begun to succeed in showing that the individualist-competitive uses of Darwinism were open to question when a wholly new problem began to emerge, on which they were themselves unable to agree: a discussion arose over the question whether racist and imperialist invocations of Darwinism had any real justification.

Darwinism was used to buttress the conservative outlook in two ways. The most popular catchwords of Darwinism, "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest," when applied to the life of man in society, suggested that nature would provide that the best competitors in a competitive situation would win, and that this process would lead to continuing improvement. In itself this was not a new idea, as economists could have pointed out, but it did give the force of a natural law to the idea of competitive struggle. Secondly, the idea of development over aeons brought new force to another familiar idea in conservative political theory, the conception that all sound development must be slow and unhurried. Society could be envisaged as an organism (or as an entity something like an organism), which could change only at the glacial pace at which new species are produced in nature. One might, like William Graham Sumner, take a pessimistic view of the import of Darwinism, and conclude that Darwinism could serve only to cause men to face up to the inherent hardship of the battle of life; or one might, like Herbert Spencer, promise that, whatever the immediate hardships for a large portion of mankind, evolution meant progress and thus assured that the whole process of life was tending toward some very remote but altogether glorious consummation. But in either case the conclusions to which Darwinism was at first put were conservative conclusions. They suggested that all attempts to

reform social processes were efforts to remedy the irremediable, that they interfered with the wisdom of nature, that they could lead only to degeneration.

As a phase in the history of conservative thought, social Darwinism deserves remark. In so far as it defended the status quo and gave strength to attacks on reformers and on almost all efforts at the conscious and directed change of society, social Darwinism was certainly one of the leading strains in American conservative thought for more than a generation. But it lacked many of the signal characteristics of conservatism as it is usually found. A conservatism that appealed more to the secularist than the pious mentality, it was a conservatism almost without religion. A body of belief whose chief conclusion was that the positive functions of the state should be kept to the barest minimum, it was almost anarchical, and it was devoid of that center of reverence and authority which the state provides in many conservative systems. Finally, and perhaps most important, it was a conservatism that tried to dispense with sentimental or emotional ties. Listen, for instance, to William Graham Sumner, explaining in his social-Darwinian classic, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, what happened when men moved out of the medieval society based on status to the modern society based on contract:

In the Middle Ages men were united by custom and prescription into associations, ranks, guilds, and communities of various kinds. These ties endured as long as life lasted. Consequently society was dependent, throughout all its details, on status, and the tie, or bond, was sentimental. In our modern state, and in the United States more than anywhere else, the social structure is based on contract, and status is of the least importance. Contract, however, is rational—even rationalistic. It is also realistic, cold, and matter-of-fact. A contract relation is based on a sufficient reason, not on custom or prescription. It is not permanent. It endures only so long as the reason for it endures. In a state based on contract sentiment is out of place in any public or common affairs. It is relegated to the sphere of private and personal relations. . . . The sentimentalists among us always seize upon the survivals of the old order. They want to save them and restore them. . . .

Whether social philosophers think it desirable or not, it is out of

the question to go back to status or to the sentimental relations which once united baron and retainer, master and servant, teacher and pupil, comrade and comrade. That we have lost some grace and elegance is undeniable. That life once held more poetry and romance is true enough. But it seems impossible that any one who has studied the matter should doubt that we have gained immeasurably, and that our her gains lie in going forward, not in going backward.

We may wonder whether, in the entire history of thought, there was ever a conservatism so utterly progressive as this. Some of the peculiarities of social Darwinism as a conservative rationale become apparent if one compares Sumner with Edmund Burke. As thinkers the two, of course, have something in common: both show the same resistance to attempts to break the mold of society and accelerate change; neither has any use for ardent reformers or revolutionaries, for the conception of natural rights, or for equalitarianism. But here the resemblance ends. Where Burke is religious, and relies upon an intuitive approach to politics and upon instinctive wisdom, Sumner is secularist and proudly rationalist. Where Burke relies upon the collective, long-range intelligence, the wisdom of the community, Sumner expects that individual self-assertion will be the only satisfactory expression of the wisdom of nature, and asks of the community only that it give full play to this self-assertion. Where Burke reveres custom and exalts continuity with the past, Sumner is favorably impressed by the break made with the past when contract supplanted status; he shows in this phase of his work a disdain for the past that is distinctly the mark of a culture whose greatest gift is a genius for technology. To him it is only "sentimentalists" who want to save and restore the survivals of the old order. Burke's conservatism seems relatively timeless and placeless, while Sumner's seems to belong pre-eminently to the post-Darwinian era and to America.

Certainly in America the roles of the liberal and the conservative have been so often intermingled, and in some ways reversed, that clear traditions have never taken form. This will go far to reveal not only why our non-conservatives have

such a hard time explaining themselves today but also why social Darwinism has such a peculiar ring as a conservative social philosophy. In the American political tradition the side of the "right" — that is, the side devoted to property and less given to popular enthusiasms and democratic professions — has been throughout the greater part of our history identified with men who, while political conservatives, were in economic and social terms headlong innovators and daring promoters. From Alexander Hamilton through Nicholas Biddle to Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan, and their fellow tycoons, the men who held aristocratic or even plutocratic views in matters political were also men who took the lead in introducing new economic forms, new types of organization, new techniques. If we look through the history of our practical politics for men who spoke favorably of restoring or conserving old values we will find them — not exclusively, to be sure, but most characteristically — among those who leaned moderately to the "left." We find them among Jeffersonians trying to save agrarianism and defend planter interests, among some Jacksonians pleading for a restoration of republican simplicity, among Populists and Progressives trying to restore a popular democracy and a competitive economy that they felt had formerly existed. The matter is, of course, not entirely so simple as this, for the reformers espoused some techniques that were admittedly new in their efforts to achieve goals that were avowedly old. But it is not until the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal that the "liberal" or "progressive" side in American politics was also the side that was wholeheartedly identified with social and economic innovation and experiment — not until after almost 150 years of national development under the Constitution that the old pattern was completely broken.

I have said that social Darwinism was a secularist philosophy, but in one important respect this needs qualification. For social Darwinism of the hard-bitten sort represented by men like Sumner embodied a vision of life and, if the phrase will be admitted, expressed a kind of secular piety that com-

mands our attention. Sumner, and no doubt after him all those who at one time or another were impressed by his views, were much concerned to face up to the hardness of life, to the impossibility of finding easy solutions and the inevitability of suffering. There is a kind of naturalistic Calvinism in which man's relation to nature is as hard and demanding as man's relation to God under the Calvinistic system. This secular piety found its practical expression in an economic ethic that seemed to be demanded with special urgency by a growing industrial society which was calling on all the labor and capital it could muster to put to work on its vast unexploited resources. Hard work and hard saving seemed to be called for, while leisure and waste were doubly suspect. The economic ethic engendered by these circumstances put a premium on those qualities that seemed necessary for the disciplining of a labor force and a force of small investors. In articulating those needs, Sumner expressed an inherited conception of economic life, even today fairly widespread among conservatives in the United States, under which economic activity was considered to be above all a field for the development and encouragement of personal character. Economic life was construed as a set of arrangements that offered inducements to men of good character, while it punished those who were, in Sumner's words, "negligent, shiftless, inefficient, silly, and imprudent."

Today we have passed out of the economic framework in which that ethic was formed. We demand leisure; we demand that we be spared economic suffering; we build up an important business, advertising, whose function it is to encourage people to spend rather than save; we devise institutional arrangements like installment buying that permit people to spend what they have not yet earned; and we take up an economic theory like that of Keynes which stresses in a new way the economic importance of spending. We think of the economic order in terms of welfare and abundance rather than scarcity; we concern ourselves more with organization and efficiency than with character and punishments

and rewards. One of the keys to the controversy of our time over the merits or defects of the "welfare state" is the fact that the very idea affronts the traditions of a great many men and women who were raised, if not upon the specific tenets of social Darwinism, at least upon the moral imperatives that it expressed. The growing divorcement of the economic process from considerations that can be used to discipline human character, and, still worse, our increasing philosophical and practical acceptance of that divorcement, is a source of real torment to the stern minority among us for whom the older economic ethic still has a great deal of meaning. And anyone who today imagines that he is altogether out of sympathy with that ethic should ask himself whether he has never, in contemplating the possibility of a nearly workless economic order, powered by atomic energy and managed by automation, had at least a moment of misgiving about the fate of man in a society bereft of the moral discipline of work.

It must also be conceded that, if men of Sumner's stamp seemed to contemplate human misery with callousness and with an excessively dogmatic certainty that nothing could be done about it, they tended to be stern masters of themselves where devotion to high principles was required. In this sense they had the virtue of consistency. Three times Sumner himself put his position at Yale in jeopardy, by his uncompromising stand on the unpopular side of a controversy — once over the use of Spencer's work in teaching, once over his opposition to the protective tariff, and once over his denunciation of the Spanish-American War. And though the practical conclusions of their philosophy usually pleased the plutocrats, men of this stamp were not simple apologists of the plutocrats; nor can the values that meant most to them be described as plutocratic values. Sumner himself thought that the plutocrats were all too often greedy and irresponsible. The virtues that Spencer and Sumner preached — personal providence, family loyalty and family responsibility, hard work, careful management, and proud self-sufficiency — were middle-class virtues. There is a cer-

tain touching irony in the thought that, while writers like these preached slow change and urged men to adapt to the environment, the very millionaires whom they took to be the "fittest" in the struggle for existence were transforming the environment with incredible rapidity and rendering the values of the Spencers and Sumners of this world constantly less and less fit for survival.

RICHARD HOFSTADTER
New York, 1955

Chapter One

The Coming of Darwinism

To have lived when this prodigious truth was advanced, debated, established, was a rare privilege in the centuries. The inspiration of seeing the old isolated mists dissolve and reveal the convergence of all branches of knowledge is something that can hardly be known to the men of a later generation, inheritors of what this age has won.

JOHN FISKE

When Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* dawned upon the world it aroused no such immediate furor in the United States as it did in England. A public sensation comparable to that stirred up in England by Huxley's famous clash with Wilberforce in June 1860 was impossible in America, where a critical election was beginning whose results would disrupt the Union and bring about a terrible Civil War. Although the first American edition of *The Origin of Species* was widely reviewed in 1860,¹ the coming of the war obscured new developments in scientific thought for all but professional scientists and a few hardy intellectuals.

Here and there, however, in quiet studies remote from the glare of politics, the ideas that were in time to transform the intellectual life of the country began to be cultivated. Darwin's friend Asa Gray, the Harvard botanist, after painstaking study of an advance copy of *The Origin of Species* sent to him by the author, wrote a careful review for the *American Journal of Sciences and Arts*, and with admirable foresight prepared a series of articles to defend evolution from the forthcoming charges of atheism. A few men who were already acquainted with the pre-Darwinian evolutionary speculation of Herbert Spencer were laying the foundations for a popular campaign in behalf of evolutionary science. A little-known resident of Salem named Edward

¹ Supernumerals refer to the notes at the end of this book (pages 217-242).

quainted with several German military leaders while serving under Herbert Hoover in Belgium during the First World War, reported in a volume on his experiences that the philosophy of the foe was a crude Darwinism ruthlessly applied to the affairs of nations.¹⁰⁰ Coming to the attention of William Jennings Bryan, Kellogg's book reinforced his fundamentalist conviction of the inherent evilness of evolutionary ideas and his determination to wage a crusade against them.¹⁰¹ John T. Scopes suffered not only for the theories of Darwin, but for Wilhelm as well. For many years Bryan had been troubled about the possible social implications of Darwinism. In 1905 E. A. Ross, then teaching at Nebraska University, had found Bryan reading *The Descent of Man*, and Bryan had told him that such teachings would "weaken the cause of democracy and strengthen class pride and the power of wealth."¹⁰² Here, as in other matters, Bryan had sound intuitions that his intellect had not the power to discipline.

Chapter Ten

Conclusion

The entire modern edification 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.

WILLIAM JAMES

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 Americans 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.¹ 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.

Bibliography

AUTHOR'S NOTE FOR REVISED EDITION: It would be impossible to add references to every relevant book or article that has appeared since the first edition. I have therefore made no effort to expand this bibliography, which itself lists only some selected works that were of special value to me. However, I wish to mention a few books published during the past six years that are of unusual pertinence. Stow Persons, ed., *Evolutionary Thought in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), has several valuable essays, which together give a broad survey of the field. Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949) deals exhaustively with its theme. The transition in American thought dealt with in my later chapters is accounted for at greater length by Morton G. White in his *Social Thought in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1949). The impact of Darwinism upon the whole of American university life and thought is discussed by Walter P. Metzger in Chapter 7 of Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

MANUSCRIPTS

Sumner: The papers of the Sumner Estate available in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University do not include Sumner's personal correspondence. The available papers shed light chiefly upon Sumner's pre-academic career.

Ward: The papers of Lester Ward in the John Hay Library at Brown University consists chiefly of thirteen volumes of letters received by Ward. They are of considerable value to one who is interested in estimating Ward's influence. The most revealing of these letters are included in the published collections edited by Bernhard J. Stern, which are cited below. Ward's library has several books with significant annotations, giving unique evidence as to his intellectual interests and opinions.

Students of this phase of American thought are fortunate to have available a vast mass of personal correspondence in printed form. Special collections of letters, and biographies cited below have extensive selections from the correspondences of Charles Darwin,