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052157434X - Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat - Mike Hawkins

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Part I

Defining Social Darwinism

Only that which has no history is definable.

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 13.

Introduction: the identity of Social Darwinism

What is Social Darwinism, and what role has it played in the history of social and political ideas? These questions, the point of departure for the present study, are simple to formulate but, as the historiography of Social Darwinism attests, difficult to answer. Anyone consulting the vast literature on Social Darwinism in the hope of resolving them is likely to experience confusion rather than enlightenment. What he or she will encounter are heated controversies over a number of issues. First, scholars dispute the definition of Social Darwinism and, as a consequence, who is to count as a 'genuine' Social Darwinist. Second, they disagree over the ideological functions of Social Darwinism with some insisting on its conservative bias whereas others emphasise its reformist – even radical – orientation. Third, there is controversy over the significance of Social Darwinism, with positions ranging from the claim that it was both widespread and influential, to the contrary view that its importance has been grossly exaggerated by hostile commentators. Finally, scholars contest the relationship between Social Darwinism and Darwin himself, broadly dividing between those who see a connection and those who insist on a radical difference between the work of the English naturalist and the ideological uses to which his ideas were put.

This dissension has helped to define the aims and the contents of this book. Indeed, it is my view that any attempt to understand the emergence and history of Social Darwinism must first come to grips with these disputes: appreciating the points at issue and the controversies they have aroused is a first step towards a different approach to the subject. For this reason, it is useful to review each of these areas of disagreement in turn.

The nature of Social Darwinism

There are several ways of categorising Social Darwinism. One widespread and seemingly straightforward tactic is to do so in terms of a series of catchphrases. This approach was implicit in Hofstadter's

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influential study of Social Darwinism in American thought, in which he referred to the 'struggle for existence' and 'survival of the fittest' as popular catchphrases of Darwinism.¹ Subsequent historians have added 'natural selection', and sometimes 'adaptation' and 'variation', to this list.²

Not all commentators agree, however, that these catchphrases adequately convey the sense of Darwinian theory. The American historian Bannister, though adopting this approach himself, maintains that after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 Darwin assigned less importance to natural selection, the struggle for existence, and survival of the fittest in evolution and attributed a greater role to other mechanisms such as the inheritance of acquired characters. For Bannister, this makes questionable the extent to which these catchphrases can be taken as encapsulating Darwin's theory.³ Other scholars, in an attempt to dissociate Darwin from Social Darwinism, have even suggested that natural selection was not the most important idea in the *Origin*.⁴ Since the expression 'survival of the fittest' was coined by Herbert Spencer rather than by Darwin, and only adopted by the latter from the fifth edition (1869) of the *Origin*, such considerations cast doubt on the legitimacy of singling out certain ideas as specifically Darwinian, thereby undermining the utility of the catchphrase approach.

There are important issues here concerning the continuity of Darwin's ideas over time and their relationship to Spencer's theories which will be taken up in later chapters. For the moment I want to raise a different objection to the catchphrase approach: any attempt to define Darwinism by means of a list of concepts – even if there is complete agreement on what is to be included in this list – encounters difficulties in classifying theorists who only subscribe to some of its features. For example, it has been claimed of English Social Darwinism that it persistently presented 'evolution as the growth of rationality'.⁵ It is unquestionably the case that many Social Darwinists did perceive the growth of rationality as an important facet of evolution. But there were others, considered by

¹ R. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 6.

² For example, K. E. Bock, 'Darwin and Social Theory', *Philosophy of Science*, 22(1955), 124; R. M. Young, 'Malthus and the Evolutionists', *Past and Present*, 43(1969), 112; R. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 7, 20; J. W. Burrow, 'Social Darwinism', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 481.

³ R. Bannister, 'The Survival of the Fittest is our Doctrine: History or Histrionics?', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31(1970), 377, 378.

⁴ J. Bronowski, 'Introduction', in M. Banton, ed., *Darwinism and the Study of Society* (London: Tavistock, 1961), x.

⁵ G. Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 176.

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themselves and their contemporaries to be Darwinists, who placed the emphasis elsewhere. Benjamin Kidd, for instance, asserted that: ‘The evolution which is slowly proceeding in human society is not primarily intellectual but religious in character.’⁶ Should, then, Kidd be excluded from the Social Darwinist camp? Such a decision would be perverse given that this statement occurs in his *Social Evolution*, which was an explicit attempt to apply Darwinism to human social and mental evolution.⁷

Similar considerations apply to the claim that a belief in historical progress is an essential attribute of Social Darwinism.⁸ This belief certainly was upheld by a number of Social Darwinists (e.g. Kidd), but in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was, alongside the belief in progress, a widespread fear of moral and physical degeneration, and a sense of decadence and the imminent demise of Western civilisation.⁹ This was sometimes fuelled by the spectre of the total destruction of humanity wrought by the cooling of the sun. The second law of thermodynamics was represented in some late nineteenth-century literature in the form of a dead earth, rendered lifeless by the cooling sun.¹⁰ These preoccupations were sometimes wedded to evolutionary theory, giving rise to modes of Social Darwinism in which progress was either seen as a rare and contingent phenomenon or else denied outright. Thus, far from believing in the inevitability of progress, the French ‘anthropo-sociologist’ Vacher de Lapouge was convinced that the rigorous application of Darwinism to social and political change exposed the chimerical nature of progress.¹¹ As will be demonstrated in later chapters, Lapouge was by no means alone in this conviction.

The point of these examples is this: what is required for an understanding of Social Darwinism is not simply an enumeration of its various components but an indication of how these components relate to one another, and of the importance of each to the overall configuration.

⁶ B. Kidd, *Social Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1894), 245.

⁷ This is acknowledged by Jones, *Social Darwinism*, 122.

⁸ R. Williams, ‘Social Darwinism’, in J. Benthall, ed., *The Limits of Human Nature* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 117.

⁹ On the prevalence of notions of degeneration during this period, see J. Chamberlin and S. Gilman, eds., *Degeneration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ C. Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (London: Longman, 1982), 182–3. Watts discusses the cultural impact of this nightmare, 86–8. See also G. Myers, ‘Nineteenth Century Popularizations of Thermodynamics and the Rhetoric of Social Prophecy’, *Victorian Studies*, 29(1985), 35–66.

¹¹ G. Vacher de Lapouge, *Les Selections sociales* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1896), 446, 449; Lapouge, *L’Aryen* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1899), vii, 512.

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Focusing on the interrelationships and relative weighting of the different ingredients of Social Darwinism produces a richer and more useful understanding of it. This is not to say that all problems pertaining to the classification of particular theorists are eliminated. Any definitional framework is bound to encounter 'hard cases' – instances where it is difficult to determine whether the relevant criteria have been satisfied. The framework proposed in the next chapter is no exception in this respect. But it has the advantage of discriminating between thinkers who embrace the configuration as a whole, including the 'rules' for interconnecting its different components, and those who make use of some of these components within a different, perhaps even antithetical, discursive framework. Social Darwinism must be seen as a *network* of interlinked ideas, subject to change over time – particularly with regard to the relationships among these ideas – but retaining its overall identity notwithstanding these modifications.

Some commentators have defined Social Darwinism as the explicit endorsement of Darwin's theory of evolution, leaving open the issue of the actual content of this theory.¹² The problem with this approach is that it includes theorists who, while seeking to legitimate their ideas by claiming their provenance in Darwin, in fact propounded doctrines which were at variance with the fundamental premisses of Darwinism. This is true of much of what has been labelled 'reform Darwinism'. On the other hand, this tactic would lead to the exclusion of Spencer who objected to being referred to as a Darwinist because he had arrived at this theory independently of Darwin's work.¹³ Defining Social Darwinism in terms of an express commitment to Darwin's ideas in the context of social theory is, therefore, unsatisfactory.

In an effort to introduce more specificity into the notion of Social Darwinism, some historians have recommended equating it with eugenics, or at least including the latter as part of the definition.¹⁴ The problem with conflating Social Darwinism with eugenics, however, is that it was possible to support one and not the other. Thus Benjamin Kidd, though a Social Darwinist, was a severe critic of eugenics, while

¹² J. R. Moore, 'Varieties of Social Darwinism', Open University Course A309, *Conflict and Stability in the Development of Modern Europe* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1980), 37. See also A. Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 103.

¹³ See H. Spencer, 'Réponse à M. Emile de Laveleye', in E. Laveleye, *Le Socialisme contemporain*, fourth edn (Paris: Alcan, 1888), 409.

¹⁴ For the first tactic, see R. J. Halliday, 'Social Darwinism: A Definition', *Victorian Studies*, 14(1971), 401; for the second, see D. P. Crook, 'Darwinism: The Political Implications', *History of European Ideas*, 2(1981), 19. Not all historians, however, regard eugenicists as bona fide Social Darwinists. See Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, 166; C. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 42.

George Bernard Shaw endorsed eugenics with enthusiasm but was dismissive of Darwinism.¹⁵ Hence while there was often a very close association between eugenics and Social Darwinism, it provides insufficient warrant for conflating them.

If this last approach is overly restrictive, then equating Social Darwinism with a belief in the beneficial effects of warfare sins in the opposite direction. This connection was made at the start of the present century by the Russian-born businessman and sociologist, Jacques Novicow (1849–1912), who proclaimed Social Darwinism to be a doctrine which believed human progress had occurred through ‘collective homicide’.¹⁶ He then proceeded to label as Social Darwinist anybody who proffered a positive assessment of warfare irrespective of the basis upon which this assessment was made. As a result Novicow included many writers who were manifestly not Darwinists, in addition to misrepresenting the views of genuine Social Darwinists who were explicitly opposed to warfare between civilised nations – Spencer being a notable but by no means the only example.¹⁷ The result of this type of procedure is to deprive the notion of Social Darwinism of any specific content and hence of any value in the analysis of ideas.

These disagreements over the intention of the term Social Darwinism are not trivial matters of academic hair-splitting, for, as we shall see, they have important ramifications for other areas of controversy.

The ideological functions of Social Darwinism

There tend to be two positions in the secondary literature on the discursive functions of Social Darwinism. One position links it to specific ideologies such as *laissez-faire* liberalism, racism or imperialism.¹⁸ A variant of this view regards Social Darwinism as performing

¹⁵ For Kidd’s attitude to eugenics, see the study by D. P. Crook, *Benjamin Kidd: Portrait of a Social Darwinist* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 78, 255. Shaw’s ideas are discussed below, chap. 7.

¹⁶ J. Novicow, *La Critique du darwinisme social* (Paris: Alcan, 1910). This connection had already been made by opponents of Social Darwinism, e.g. Laveleye in *Le Socialisme*, 397–400, 410. For a detailed assessment of the relationship between Darwinism and warfare, see P. Crook, *Darwinism, War and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Spencer believed that struggle had evolved from warfare in primitive times to industrial competition in advanced societies. Novicow repudiated the identification of economic competition with struggle, although earlier in his career he had made precisely this identification himself and overtly endorsed Darwinism. See Novicow, *Les Luites entre les sociétés humaines et leurs phases successives* (Paris: Alcan: 1893), 218.

¹⁸ Ball and Dagger, in their textbook on political ideologies, define Social Darwinism as the adaptation of Darwinism to classical liberal theories of *laissez-faire* and limited government. T. Ball and R. Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal* (New

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broader but still politically distinctive functions. Thus Kelly, in his analysis of German Social Darwinism, depicts it as legitimating 'the competitive, hierarchical, bourgeois society'.¹⁹ Degler, in an account of Darwinism in American social theory, likewise maintains that 'the aim of Social Darwinism was frankly conservative . . .'.²⁰ In contrast, a second position regards Social Darwinism as multivalent, capable of adaptation to a wide range of ideological stances.²¹ In this perspective, Darwinism could be, and was, enlisted in the services of opposed political positions – militarism and pacifism, capitalism and socialism, patriarchy and feminism, totalitarianism and anarchism. So, to take the German case again, proponents of the multivalent perspective stress the variety of ideological contexts in which Social Darwinism was used rather than confining it to conservative apologetics.²²

One aim of the present study is to explore the ideological roles played by Social Darwinism and its discursive boundaries. But this requires a satisfactory definition of Social Darwinism, one not inherently predisposed to a particular political perspective or ideological function. This involves a separation between the content and the function of Social Darwinism, a distinction which, I shall argue in the next section, is not always adhered to.

The significance of Social Darwinism

One of the most contested areas in the historiography of Social Darwinism pertains to its significance. Early critics like the Belgian, Emile Laveleye (1822–92), and Novicow portrayed it as a pervasive set of ideas in European culture, a viewpoint reinforced by Hofstadter's study of the USA. Many scholars have upheld these verdicts. Thus some have ascribed an influential role to Social Darwinism in the social sciences during the last half to a third of the nineteenth century.²³ Raymond Williams has extended this influence to the realm of popular culture, arguing that the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest were daily realities for many ordinary people in the nineteenth

York: HarperCollins, 1991), 257. Yet the authors acknowledge that Social Darwinism was readily adapted in the service of non-liberal causes: *ibid.*, 193.

¹⁹ Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin*, 100. Kelly is aware of more radical uses of Darwinism (101), but for some reason refuses to regard such usages as true Social Darwinism.

²⁰ Degler, *In Search of Human Nature*, 13. Cf. also 112.

²¹ For example Jones, *Social Darwinism*, 77; Crook, *Darwinism, War and History*, 192.

²² R. Weikart, 'The Origins of Social Darwinism in Germany, 1859–1895', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54(1993), 469–88.

²³ W. Stark, 'Natural and Social Selection', in Banton, *Darwinism and the Study of Society*, 49; C. Shaw, 'Eliminating the Yahoo: Eugenics, Social Darwinism and Five Fabians', *History of Political Thought*, 8(1987), 521.

century, as is suggested by the impact of Social Darwinism on the popular fiction of the period.²⁴ Greta Jones likewise refers to the 'ubiquity of Social Darwinism' in English thought, while the historian, Sternhell, has proposed that after Darwin's death, biology played a dominant role in the emerging sciences of man and society, with Social Darwinism virtually assuming the status of a religion.²⁵ The impression conveyed by these studies is that Social Darwinism was highly influential during the last few decades of the nineteenth and first four decades of the twentieth centuries, an influence that extended beyond the realms of social theory to encompass popular culture, literature and medicine.

This judgement, however, has come in for severe criticism. Several influential histories have downplayed the impact of Social Darwinism on the developing social sciences, claiming that the principal input into social evolutionism came from Lamarck or expressly social theorists rather than from Darwin.²⁶ Studies of individual countries have also concluded that the impact of Social Darwinism has been greatly exaggerated and that far from penetrating popular culture it in fact occupied a fairly marginal position in the country in question.²⁷ Moreover, revisionist historiography goes much further than simply denying an important role to Social Darwinism.²⁸ It often takes the additional step of claiming that far from reflecting an existential reality, 'Social Darwinism' is actually a construct of modern historians. For some revisionists the entire notion is a straw man, a myth – one which Hofstadter is often assigned a key role in manufacturing – concocted by reformers and critics of *laissez-faire* and individualism in order to

²⁴ Williams, 'Social Darwinism', 121, 126 *et seq.*

²⁵ Jones, *Social Darwinism*, viii; Z. Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), 146–7; Z. Sternhell, M. Sznajder and M. Asheri, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 23.

²⁶ Bock, 'Darwin and Social Theory', 124; R. A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 161–2; A. Leeds, 'Darwinian and "Darwinian" Evolutionism in the Study of Society and Culture', in T. F. Glick, ed., *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism*, second edn (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 440–3; P. Bowler, *Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 10; Bowler, *The Invention of Progress* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

²⁷ This is the verdict of Bannister with regard to Britain and the USA in his *Social Darwinism* and 'The Survival of the Fittest'; of Kelly for Germany in *The Descent of Darwin*, 8, 109–10; and of L. Clark for France in her *Social Darwinism in France* (University of Alabama Press, 1984), chap. 6.

²⁸ The term 'revisionist' initially referred to the critics of Hofstadter who denied any evidence of a widespread endorsement of Social Darwinism among American businessmen. See J. A. Rogers, 'Darwinism and Social Darwinism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33(1972), 267. It has since been extended to cover all opponents of the view that Social Darwinism was influential and widespread. See Jones, *Social Darwinism*, ix; Crook, *Darwinism, War and History*, 200–6.

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discredit their opponents.²⁹ They contend that careful analysis reveals that figures who have been seen as paradigmatic Social Darwinists – for example Ernst Haeckel in Germany and William Graham Sumner in the USA – have in fact been misinterpreted and their alleged Social Darwinism blown out of proportion.³⁰

There can be no question of the importance of revisionism to the study of Social Darwinism. Critical appraisal of earlier studies coupled with detailed investigations of individual thinkers or countries have shifted the burden of proof to those who believe Social Darwinism was significant and underlined the need for a more careful consideration of the subject matter and how it is to be investigated. Nevertheless, one of the purposes of the present study is to challenge the revisionists. In some instances their conclusions are an artefact of their conceptualisation of Social Darwinism. For example, Leeds defines Darwinism in terms of its *modern* theoretical content, purged of those original features that have been subsequently discarded or revised as well as its original philosophical underpinnings.³¹ Small wonder, then, that he found little evidence of ‘genuine’ Darwinism in the social theories he examined. Bannister, who, as was noted earlier, defines Darwinism as a set of catchphrases, implies that apologists for US expansionism and imperialism cannot be described as Social Darwinists because they used the notion of struggle to justify national solidarity rather than remorseless individualistic competition.³² This constitutes an arbitrary switch from a conceptualisation of Darwinism in terms of *content* to one in terms of *function* – in this case the defence of *laissez-faire* individualism. Here again is evidence of the need for an adequate definition of Social Darwinism before any realistic assessment of its influence and significance is possible. But quite apart from any methodological shortcomings in the work of the revisionists, recent research on key figures in the development of the social sciences in Europe and the USA renders the alleged marginality of Social Darwinism deeply implausible. It is impossible to give more than a cursory overview of this research here, and there is still a good deal of work to be done, but the results to date contradict the assertions of the revisionists.

²⁹ Kelly, *Descent*, 101; Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, 9, and ‘Survival of the Fittest’, 398. Crook, while critical of the revisionists, nevertheless agrees that ‘There were no schools of Social Darwinists’: *Darwinism, War and History*, 204.

³⁰ For Haeckel, see Kelly, *Descent*, 113; on Sumner, see R. Bannister, ‘William Graham Sumner’s Social Darwinism: A Reconsideration’, *History of Political Economy*, 4(1973), 89–109.

³¹ Leeds, ‘Darwinian and “Darwinian” Evolutionism’, 437–8.

³² Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, 231.

Darwinism certainly played a formative role in the development of psychology.³³ Darwin's own attempts to derive human mental traits from an animal origin were an important influence on the work of the British psychologist George Romanes.³⁴ This influence is also evident in the social psychology of the American William James (1842–1910), who sought evolutionary explanations for such human instincts as acquisitiveness, fear, play and pugnacity, and repeatedly cited Darwin's authority.³⁵ The impact of Darwinism is equally discernible in the emerging disciplines of sexology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In the latter instance, one historian has described the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) as a 'psychobiology of mind' in which Darwinism supplied a framework for the investigation not only of mental pathologies but also of the origins of morality and civilisation.³⁶

It is more difficult to assess the legacy of Social Darwinism in anthropology, sociology and political science, due to the absence of detailed studies of certain key contributors. Some theorists were overtly hostile to Darwinism, like Gaetano Mosca (1858–1931), who, in his efforts to establish a science of politics, denied any role to natural selection and the struggle for existence.³⁷ Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) was likewise critical of Social Darwinism which, he believed, required 'considerable modification' if it was to be of service to the social sciences.³⁸ Nevertheless, Pareto accepted the existence of adaptation and the struggle for survival in social life, suggesting a more complex (and perhaps ambivalent) stance *vis-à-vis* Darwinism on his part which would repay closer investigation.³⁹

The position of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) is also a complex one. Weber's inaugural address of 1895 at the University of Freiburg contained strong echoes of Social Darwinism. Referring to relations between Germans and Poles in East Prussia, Weber remarked that 'the free play of the forces of selection does not always operate in

³³ E. Boring, *A History of Experimental Psychology*, second edn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), 743.

³⁴ See the comments by Romanes in the preface to his *Animal Intelligence*, sixth edn (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), vi, xi.

³⁵ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. [1890] (London: Constable and Co., 1950), especially II, chaps. 24–8.

³⁶ F. J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* (London: Fontana, 1980), 275 and chap. 10. See also C. Badcock, *Psycho-Darwinism* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

³⁷ G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, tr. H. Kahn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 28–31, 121–3.

³⁸ S. E. Finer, ed., *Vilfredo Pareto: Sociological Writings*, tr. D. Mirfin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 213.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 102, 113–14. There is a discussion of the role of Social Darwinism in Pareto's work in T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, 2 vols. (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968), I, 219–28.