

Social Darwinism

 *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450, 2007*
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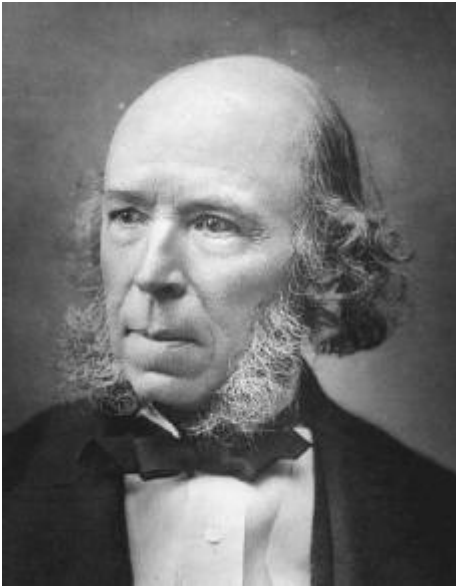
The term *Darwinism* refers most centrally to the theory of [natural selection](#), according to which only the fittest species in organic nature survive, whereas the unfit become extinct. The extension of these ideas to social thought is known as [Social Darwinism](#).

The application of models of [evolution](#) to human societies long preceded the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, however. Already in the eighteenth century, historians influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment—including William Robertson and Adam Smith—had constructed a universal vision of history in which all societies advanced through four stages (from hunter-gathering to commercial society) as they progressed from "rudeness to refinement." This theory of development by stages influenced European notions of [progress](#) and of civilization among non-Europeans: peoples engaged in trade were held to be superior to those who relied exclusively on agriculture while the latter, in turn, were considered more advanced than subsistence hunter-gatherers.

In the early nineteenth century, the notion that world history and human society proceeded in evolutionary stages was purveyed in the works of Auguste Comte, G. W. F. Hegel, and Karl Marx, each of whom searched for general laws that underpinned [social change](#). Unlike later theorists, these earlier political writers had a universal outlook that did not exclude non-European peoples from following the road already taken by European nations. By the time of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), however, this optimism had given way to a bleaker, Malthusian conception of competition between human beings for the scarce resources required for subsistence. In the late nineteenth century, this notion became linked directly to [imperialism](#). It provided a framework for understanding the rise and decline of nations and enlivened competition among European nations.

Spencer—who coined the term *survival of the fittest* several years before Darwin set forth his theory—developed an all-encompassing conception of human society and relations based on evolutionary principles. His conviction that a general law for all processes of the earth could be formulated led him to apply the biologic scheme of evolution to society. The principles of social change must be the same, he supposed, as those of the universe at large. Although Spencer clung to outdated scientific ideas, such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's debunked thesis concerning the inheritance of acquired characteristics, it would be inaccurate to argue that he corrupted Darwin's pristine scientific ideas. Many of Darwin's ideas emerged from the social context in which he lived. As Marx noted, "it is remarkable how Darwin recognizes in beasts and plants his English society with its divisions of labor, competition, [and] opening up of new markets" (Dickens 2000, p. 29).

Spencer's ideas about selection also were born from his political beliefs: He repudiated government interference with the "natural," unimpeded growth of society. He maintained that society was evolving toward increasing freedom for individuals and so held that government intervention should be kept to a minimum. This belief led him to oppose all state aid to the poor, a group he maintained were unfit and should be eliminated. Spencer viewed state intervention to ameliorate their condition as the "artificial preservation of those least able to take care of themselves." As Spencer wrote, "the whole effort of Nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better" (Hofstadter 1955, p. 41). Although he personally was against colonization and the European rivalry this activity engendered, Spencer's ideas were catalysts for a generation of influential writers on



international relations and empire. Social Darwinism played a key role both in imperial rivalry among European states and in the justification of empire over non-European peoples. Social Darwinistic arguments about the struggle to be the "fittest" were utilized to justify rising military expenditure, to press for increased national efficiency, and to promote certain types of government. For example, Walter Bagehot harnessed biology to defend liberal [democracy](#) in the 1870s. Emphasizing cultural rather than individual selection, he sought to prove that the institutions and practice of liberal democracy were the guarantor of evolutionary progress. "In every particular state in the world," Bagehot wrote in *Physics and Politics* (1872), "those nations which are the strongest tend to prevail over the others; and in certain marked peculiarities the strongest tend to be the best" (Baumgart 1982, p. 84). In 1886 the Russian sociologist Jacques Novikov defined the foreign policy of a state as "the art of pursuing the struggle for existence among social organisms." War, in this view, was a determinant of the "fittest" nation: Karl Pearson claimed that should war cease, "mankind will no longer progress," for "there will be nothing to check the fertility of inferior stock, [and] the relentless law of heredity will not be controlled and guided by natural selection" (Baumgart 1982, p. 87).

Darwinism was put at the service of imperialism, as a new instrument in the hands of theorists of [race](#) and civilizational struggle. Competition with other European states urged the securing of colonies to prevent raw material, land, and potential markets from being seized by rapacious rivals. In Theodore Roosevelt's "The Strenuous Life" (1899), the future American president warned against the possibility of elimination in an international struggle for existence. America, he said, could not shrink from "hard contests" for empire or else the "bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world" (Hofstadter 1955, p. 180). Successful imperial ventures thus were perceived to indicate the vitality, and hence "fitness," of a nation.

Social Darwinism also proved to be a justification for the subjugation of non-European peoples, who were deemed less "fit" than Europeans. Nature, theorists argued, intended the rule of superior European nations over inferior colonial races. Racial arguments permeated the language of adherents of Social Darwinism as well. The French political leader Jules Ferry (1832–1893) explicitly argued that "the superior races have rights over the inferior races" (Baumgart 1982, p. 89). After World War I, the mandate and trusteeship system set up by the victors over much of the colonized world utilized arguments that derived from Social Darwinism. In 1922 Baron F. D. Lugard argued that the British Empire had a "dual mandate" in tropical dependencies "unsuited for white settlement," calling for the

"advancement of the subject races" and "the development of [the territories'] material resources for the benefit of mankind." He insisted that indigenous populations were benefiting from "the influx of manufactured goods and the substitution of law and order for the methods of barbarism" (Lugard 1922, pp. 616-618). Social Darwinism thus lent a pseudoscientific veneer to colonial subjugation and bolstered the alleged civilizing mission of Europeans to non-Europeans.

The most extreme form of Social Darwinism was **eugenics**. Proponents of eugenics claimed that particular racial or social groups were naturally superior, and sought the enactment of laws that would control **human heredity** by forbidding **marriage** between people of different races and restricting the reproductive activities of people they considered unworthy, such as criminals and the mentally ill. In the late 1920s and 1930s, Nazis drew on such extreme precepts of Social Darwinism in their attempt to create an idealized Aryan race, an effort that culminated in the Holocaust and the brutal deaths of millions of Jews, Roma (gypsies), and members of other groups considered inferior by the Nazis.

SEE ALSO [Imperialism, Liberal Theories of](#) ; [Imperialism, Marxist Theories of](#) .

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