

Whither are We Moving?: Social Darwinism and the Rhetoric of Class Conflict in the United States

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In late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, rapid socio-economic change left the nation unsettled. As the social and demographic changes that accompanied commercialization and industrialization began to shift the traditional organizational bases of society, scientific and intellectual trends continued to chip away at conventional understandings of the nature of man and human society. Those who sought to understand these changes found a new organizing principle and new rhetoric in the biology of Charles Darwin, and this rhetoric displayed itself in the language of both the thinkers now known as Social Darwinists and those who opposed them.

Darwin's ideas hold a significant place in modern scientific theory. He and his fellow biologist Alfred Russell Wallace posited the now famous concept of adaptation and evolution through natural selection. This theory was first made public in 1859 with Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, and created an immediate firestorm as his supporters and detractors debated the theory's veracity and its implications. Even at Darwin's very first introduction of his theory, a heated engagement erupted that set the tone for the controversy that was to surround this work.

Darwin's work carried with it the essence of several significant intellectual trends of his day. Darwin's idea of the driving forces in evolution, competition and scarcity, stem from the work of Thomas Malthus. Malthusian economics, and its emphasis on the bleak inevitability of struggle, is clearly identifiable in Darwin's work. Robert Lyell's geology formed another facet of the intellectual underpinning of Darwinian theory. Lyell argued that geological changes occurred gradually over long periods of time, a concept Darwin applied to the biological changes that occurred in species.¹ All of these elements appear in Darwin's proposal that organisms with variations that helped them outcompete their peers would pass these variations on through generations, eventually changing the species.

Darwin considered his theory of evolution to belong solely within the science of biology, but it was almost inevitable that social theorists adopted it to explain the intense changes occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² Herbert Spencer, a nineteenth century British philosopher and sociologist, and the originator of the concept of Social Darwinism, had actually already proposed a theory of social evolution and coined the term that many people confusedly believe came from Darwin himself, "survival of the fittest."³

¹ Darwin's indebtedness to Lyell is repeatedly emphasized in Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994).

² Paul Crook, *Darwin's Coat-Tails: Essays on Social Darwinism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2007), 35.

³ Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

From Malthus, Darwin drew the concepts of scarcity of resources and the resultant battle for subsistence. Malthus argued that the growth of a population dramatically exceeds the growth of its food supply.⁴ This will in turn create a system driven by scarcity, where organisms compete and strive to subsist, driven by “necessity, that imperious all-pervading law of nature.”⁵ For Darwin, this principle worked as a selector of evolutionary success- those creatures who could compete well would dominate the battle for subsistence, thereby depriving others of the necessary means of survival.

Darwin published at a time of rapid and unsettling change. New scientific and social ideas were being debated in the halls of universities and governments. The French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, with all their attendant carnage and radical rhetoric, were recent memories that lingered. The early days of empire building were well under way, accompanied by tremendous economic and social change. The rapid rise of commercial markets gave way to rapid industrialization. This hastened the growth of an urban working class. Industrialization and urbanization created new social problems, as the vast new wealth that was created found itself largely concentrated in the hands of a few, exacerbating the gap between the haves and have-nots. Traditional social order was changing rapidly. Tensions were high as people began to take notice of the changes and their attendant problems and proposed different solutions.⁶

Darwinism entered this cultural fray and exacerbated it even further. It provided a well-reasoned, solid argument explaining the origins of species without the need to invoke the divine. This further unsettled the traditional foundations of society because it cast doubt on one of the fundamental assumptions of society: that man is special, divinely created and gifted. Darwin’s proposal relegated man to the status of an animal, and did so with solid science. The traditional religious and patriarchal model of society found itself challenged in new ways.

People needed a new organizing concept of society. Since man was now an animal, simply another piece of nature, Darwinism lent itself well to this. Darwinism was wrapped in ideas and rhetoric that resonated with people of the late nineteenth century. People of the period heavily internalized the ideas of scarcity, competition, and the struggle for survival. This, coupled with Darwinism’s own grounding in social concepts, caused some to apply its concepts to society. These social theorists sought to address the concerns that faced them using a new foundation for understanding society. They appropriated the concepts and rhetoric of Darwinian theory to do so, applying concepts found in Darwinian biology to human society and using its key ideas to construct their social theory. However, thinkers who used Darwinian ideas and language in creating their theories tended to attach their societal preconceptions to them, leading to a dichotomy in usage. Some more conservative theorists seeking to justify the current social system of inequality and wealth disparity used it to entrench their position, while more liberal and progressive voices used the ideas to shore up their proposals for reform.

⁴ Thomas Malthus, *Population: The First Essay*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 5.

⁵ Ibid.

The earliest prominent voices, British thinker Herbert Spencer and his American disciple William Graham Sumner, were conservatives who used Darwin's terms to justify the inequalities generated by the transforming economy and distribution of power. These thinkers focused on the hereditary nature (as they perceived it) of human characteristics, physical, mental, and moral, to describe fitness and posit conditions for the advancement of society. They saw themselves and those who achieved economic or political success as "the fittest," that nature had chosen them in its fierce competition because of their gifts of intellect and innovation. These theorists argued that the poor, the unfit in their eyes, were being weeded out of the human gene pool through their own moral failings, for the "drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be... Nature has set him on the process of decline and dissolution."⁶ Those who argued against Spencer and Sumner held that the outcome need not be so cruel, either arguing that humans must all help each other toward the eventual higher state of society or that the evolutionary metaphor did not apply to human society. Essentially, these social theorists applied their preconceptions to certain tenets of Darwinism and used them to engage each other in a debate about social structures and relationships as the weight of industrialization changed them.

Social theory presented in the terms of Darwinian biology held particular resonance for Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As members of a society undergoing change at a tremendous pace and trying to understand itself anew in its rapidly evolving circumstances and position in global politics, Americans could see their own image in the pages of *On the Origin of Species*. American thinkers of this period, who largely valued intrepid individualism, vigor, and tenacity, could identify with the hard-scrabble struggle for a place in the world depicted by Charles Darwin.⁷ As such, American thinkers seized on the ideas that they perceived in Darwinian biology and translated it into social theory.

As of yet, historians have not agreed on a definition for "Social Darwinism." The first use of the phrase identified thus far was by Joseph Fisher, a nineteenth century Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, in 1877. Fisher used the phrase in reference to the evolution of the landholding class in Ireland.⁸ Interestingly, in a survey of the proliferation of various Darwinian ideas conducted by Darwin's colleague, George J. Romanes in 1895, the phrase is nowhere to be found.⁹ Robert C. Bannister, historian and professor emeritus at Swarthmore College, points out that none of the thinkers who are now eponymous with the movement ever referred to themselves as Social Darwinists.¹⁰ The first historian to produce major work on the subject was the prominent Richard Hofstadter in 1948; however, Hofstadter failed to establish a clear and consistent definition of the term.¹¹ Even so, the ways in which he depicted Social Darwinism have largely colored subsequent

⁶ William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), 114.

⁷Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 5.

⁸ Hobsbawm, Eric, *Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (New York: Vintage Press, 1987), Pg. 243-244; Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, pg. 254.

⁹ George J. Romanes, "The Darwinism of Darwin, and of the Post-Darwinian Schools," *The Monist* 6, no. 1 (October 1895). 1-27.

¹⁰ Bannister, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

work on the matter in one form or another. Some historians have taken issue with Hofstadter's clearly negative portrayal of Social Darwinist thinkers, citing his tendency to apply the moniker to theorists with whom he clearly disagreed.¹²

Darwin himself struggled mightily with the implications of his theory for human life. "What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write," he penned in reference to the brutal natural world, "on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature!"¹³ In his work, Darwin had connected mankind more thoroughly to this "blundering low and horridly cruel" natural world than ever before, and afterwards he and all his readers had to deal with the consequences. While Darwin's own thoughts on the issue have been hard to determine, in certain instances he spoke in terms later echoed by Social Darwinists. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a letter written by Darwin in criticism of labor unions:

The unions are also opposed to piece-work, -- in short to all competition. I fear that Cooperative Societies, which many look to as the main hope for the future, likewise exclude competition. This seems to me a great evil for the future progress of mankind...¹⁴

He goes on to briefly mention the evolutionary advantage of "temperate and frugal" workers have over those who are "drunken and reckless."¹⁵ This passage seems to demonstrate a belief that competition represents a means of improvement for human society, as denoted by his worry for the future "of all mankind."¹⁶

However, Darwin also recognized that his biology could explain more positive aspects of human nature. In his *Descent of Man*, Darwin attempted to further situate humans in nature by demonstrating the evolutionary basis of our distinct mental, moral, and emotional faculties. This work also serves to provide some understanding of his views relating to the social application of his evolutionary theory. Darwin posits that man's social and mental qualities made him successful by providing the basis for group cohesion.¹⁷ In turn, this cohesion made humans better competitors, as their willingness to "warn each other of danger, to aid and defend each other" allowed them to "succeed better and conquer the other."¹⁸ He also notes that humans must participate in the same struggle for existence that other animals do, both within and outside their own species.¹⁹

¹² Thomas C. Leonard, "Origins of the Myth of Social Darwinism: The Ambiguous Legacy of Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 71 (2009), 40.

¹³ Charles R. Darwin to J.D. Hooker, July 13, 1856. In the Darwin Correspondence Project. <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/entry-1924>. (accessed April 30, 2014).

¹⁴ Charles R. Darwin to Heinrich Fick, July 26, 1872, quoted in "A Recently Discovered Darwin Letter on Social Darwinism," *Isis* 86, no. 4, (Dec. 1995): 611.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Charles R. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 163.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

Furthermore, he attributes humankind's success to natural selection through the struggle, identifying the process of competition as an important factor in the progress of the species.²⁰ In speaking of the measures taken to protect the poor, sick, and other "unfit" individuals, he states that we "check the process of elimination," which is "highly injurious to the race of man."²¹ He wrote these words as a warning against these measures, blaming them for preserving the "weaker" members of humankind. While Darwin's own thoughts remain hard to pin down, at times his opinions seemed to resemble the basic premises of Social Darwinism *a la* Spencer and Sumner. Likewise, Darwin's emphasis on the importance of man's sociability lends itself well to the more liberal theories, which tended to be more social democratic and to call for cooperation and social combination. At the very least, one can reasonably surmise that Darwin understood that his work had value for describing society, though he felt the deep ambivalence that came with extrapolating upon that notion.

Social Darwinists tended to latch on to a few key concepts of Darwinian biology when constructing their theories, but attached different meanings to them than Darwin had originally intended. Generally, Social Darwinian theorists tended to view society organically, governed by the same laws as natural creatures. They believed that society was evolving towards a higher form of great complexity and advancement. This differed from Darwin's version of evolutionary success, which simply required a species to survive. The idea of advancement as an evolutionary achievement was one not necessarily contained in Darwinism- after all, the most successful competitors according to Darwin's biology are largely considered vermin. Since such a definition made those whom they had spoken against, the poor and laboring classes, the most successful humans, Social Darwinists, especially the more conservative ones, needed to redefine success to fit their pre-existing philosophy and rhetoric.

Social Darwinists also attached great weight to the ideas of competition, struggle for survival, and fitness. As in Darwin's biology, scarcity of resources and the competition to acquire them propelled individuals, and thereby society, forward. Social Darwinists largely defined success in terms of economics. The winners, the fittest, were those who accumulated and controlled vast amounts of resources. These authors also equated economic success with virtue. Therefore, one's virtue and economic standing defined fitness. Conversely, the unfit were the poor, laboring classes, and those who had a disability of any sort. Social Darwinists considered them the morally and physically unfit detritus of society, destined to lose in the evolutionary contest.

Additionally, conservative Social Darwinists, who wrote in defense of the existing social order, spoke in terms of "the laws of nature." Sumner wrote that, "competition is a law of nature" and "this is a world in which the rule is, 'Root, hog, or die.'"²² To them, conflict was a natural phenomenon, with poverty and inequality both driving and resulting from conflict and struggle.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 206.

²² William Graham Sumner, *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays* ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914), 82, 29.

However, society did not need to ameliorate either, as their basis in nature therefore made them inevitable.

Spencer proposed the idea that society could be viewed as an organism, evolving steadily and inevitably over time, a concept that he called social determinism.²³ For Spencer, evolutionary success did not equate to fecundity, as in Darwin's biology, but in the advancement and complexity of civilization the society had attained.²⁴ Spencer theorized that conflict and competition served to select the fittest societies and individuals in an ongoing evolution toward greater complexity and an eventual equilibrium of any conflicting forces.²⁵

Spencer transferred the animals' struggle for survival to economic competition in human society. Practically applied, Spencer's social model had no room for the working class and poor—his unfit—and so society had no mandate for interfering with the process of natural selection through conflict. He opposed welfare laws and governmental intervention in the economy. Any means taken to help the less fortunate in their struggle would hinder the natural evolution of society by facilitating “the multiplication of those worst fitted for existence” because they would not be subject to the culling forces “consequent on their incapacity or misconduct.”²⁶ Any perceived unfairness in society or exploitation of the lower classes by the upper class was simply the working of nature and the evolutionary cycle. Spencer used the weight of nature as an argument to defend exploitation of the poor and the conflict that accompanied it.

A prominent American theorist in the vein of Spencer was William Graham Sumner, a professor at Yale, an early sociologist, and the most recognized theorist of Social Darwinism.²⁷ Sumner, like Spencer, viewed society as an organism and equated nature's struggle for resources with human competition in the economic arena.²⁸ In his view, the amassing of capital represented both an evolutionary goal and significant advantage in the evolutionary struggle.²⁹ Sumner posited that inequality must exist, both as an impetus to produce the competition that advanced society and as a reward for success. He attached great importance to capital, arguing that the formation of capital represented a significant milestone in societal development, and that its accumulation and hereditary transmission was the human equivalent of a creature passing a superior adaptation on to its offspring.³⁰

Sumner's theory had bleak results when applied socially. Some historians and theorists who have studied Sumner's work hold that much of his rhetoric served only to justify the positions of power that his adherents held, or to attempt to stave off class conflict, with its appeals to the

²³ Stated frequently in the chapter on Herbert Spencer found in Orrin E. Klapp, *Models of Social Order* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1973).

²⁴ Herbert Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Causes,” *The Westminster Review* 67 (April 1857): 445-465.

²⁵ Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (New York: Clarke, Given, and Hooper, 1880), 418-424.

²⁶ Herbert Spencer, *Man Versus the State; and Social Statics* (New York: Appleton Century, 1914).

²⁷ Hofstadter, 51, 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

²⁹ Sumner, *The Challenge of Facts*, 145-150.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

inevitability and necessity of inequality and unrestricted competition.³¹ Like Spencer, Sumner spoke out against any attempt to impose regulation on the competitive order through governmental intervention.³² Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that Sumner attacked all but a few economic reforms proposed during his heyday in the late nineteenth century.³³ Sumner's commitment to social determinism and an organic evolution model of society provided another weapon in his arsenal to deflect proposals of assistance and programs of reform. Since society had been evolving for millennia, he argued, any action taken by man to change any facet of the natural order would ultimately be meaningless. Furthermore, such an action would be contrary to nature. His belief in the importance of *laissez-faire* economics and small government, along with his defense of capital accumulation and transmission of hereditary capital, made him an apologist for the wealthy and conservative.

Sumner was also notable for his rejection of the traditional bases of American political ideology. Natural rights and equality of man were fictions to him, or at best understood as "rules of the game of social competition" arbitrarily grafted onto the struggle for existence at the whim of reformers.³⁴ Moreover, such an imposition was anathema, similar to governmental interference with competition. According to Sumner, if everyone was equal, then there was no "fittest," thus rendering the evolutionary mechanism meaningless.

The views discussed above detail the philosophies of those thinkers who sought to defend the existing social order. The umbrella of Darwinist rhetoric also covers viewpoints that opposed Social Darwinism. Like the conservative theorists, this group grafted components of Darwinian theory onto their own social preconceptions and often displayed a deep ambivalence towards Social Darwinism. This group held views across a wide range, from radical anarchists, socialists and communists, and from big government reformers and Reform Darwinists to Social Gospel ministers.³⁵ They sought to promote reform, remove the view of conflict and inequality as necessary and good states of nature, and "elevate mutual aid to the status of a natural law," thereby grounding their own argument in nature. Alternatively, some opposed the application of biological principle to society altogether. These theorists crusaded on behalf of the poor and working class, but avoided, and sometimes demonized, Social Darwinism.³⁶

One voice that rose in competition with the Social Darwinists was the socialist theorist Laurence Gronlund. While Gronlund's name has largely fallen by the wayside, his was a moderate and pious voice that articulated reform and socio-economic issues in a way that broadly appealed to intellectuals of his day. Gronlund combated the creed of individualistic, no-holds-barred competition as supported by Spencer and Sumner. Instead, he promoted the advancement

³¹ Hofstadter, 56.

³² *Ibid.*, 63-66.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ William Graham Sumner, *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. A.G. Keller and Maurice Davies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 358-362.

³⁵ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860- 1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 182; Hofstadter, 105-108.

³⁶ Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 100.

of society through combination- working together and pooling resources in order to succeed- which moves society towards socialism.³⁷

Gronlund applied parts of Darwin's evolutionary metaphor to society while rejecting others, and argued that human intervention in evolution should be the next step in human development. Specifically, Gronlund rejected the application of struggle for existence to human societal evolution. He attacked competition as counter-productive economically and evolutionally, because it reduced humanity to our basest instincts, debasing ourselves to the point of inhumanity.³⁸ For Gronlund, there need not be a free-for-all to produce a winner at the expense of others. Instead, people should replace the struggle for existence with the cooperative, mutually beneficial struggle against nature.³⁹ Paradoxically, he demonstrated this using the capitalist movement towards trusts as an example of the inevitability of combination.⁴⁰ Implicit in his assertions against unrestrained competition is an assault on the individualists who elevated themselves at the expense of others, a rhetorical jab questioning the true extent of their intellectual and moral evolution. He turns the rhetoric of the superiority of capitalism on its head by writing that the trust renders the individual capitalist unfit by its superiority.⁴¹

The work of British economist and political thinker Walter Bagehot represents an interesting viewpoint within the spectrum of Darwinian rhetoric. As a liberal writer, Bagehot found himself in opposition to the canon of Spencer and Sumner, but still focused on competition as the driving factor in the progress of civilization.⁴² Bagehot argued for liberalism as the best medium for competition of ideas and people.⁴³ He takes an interesting, somewhat moderate stance on the governance of this competitive field:

Progress is only possible in those happy cases where the force of legality has gone far enough to bind the nation together, but not far enough to kill out all varieties and destroy nature's perpetual tendency to change.⁴⁴

Here, Bagehot speaks of the balance of regulation and free competition needed to produce progress. So, while he shared an emphasis on individual liberty and *laissez faire* competition with Spencer and Sumner, he moderated this with a recognition that the playing grounds must be kept fair, so to speak. Bagehot assigned agency for progress in human society to both legal intervention

³⁷ Hofstadter, 114.

³⁸ Laurence Gronlund, *The New Economy: A Peaceable Solution to the Social Problem* (New York: Herbert S. Stone and Company, 1898), 28, 60-62.

³⁹ Laurence Gronlund, *Our Destiny: The Influence of Socialism on Morals and Religion; an Essay in Ethics* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Company, 1891), 60-61.

⁴⁰ This is stated prominently throughout Gronlund's *New Economy*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴² Gregory Cleays, "The "Survival of the Fittest" and the Origins of Social Darwinism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 2, (April, 2000): 229.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics; or, Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of "Natural Selection" and "Inheritance" to Political Society* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873).

and free competition, and argued that true progress is found in the “assignment of comparative magnitude to two known agencies.”⁴⁵

Furthermore, competition on the societal level, most notably war, created additional facilitators of progress. Bagehot named these “provisional institutions” and “intellectual progress.”⁴⁶ As examples of provisional institutions, he cited slavery and wartime expansion of government, societal adaptations that created a competitive advantage for a society, thereby ensuring its victory and progression.⁴⁷ He equated intellectual progress with moral progress, albeit inspired by martial action. He writes, “War both needs and generates certain virtues... as valor, veracity, the spirit of obedience, the habit of discipline,” and goes on to relate how societies in possession of these virtues advance themselves and other societies, and thereby civilization at large, by the “destruction of the opposite vices.”⁴⁸

Bagehot’s work is an interesting blend of Darwinian principles found in the work of various other social theorists of his day. In his writings on conflict, he used military imagery and metaphors, and clearly demonstrated a belief that natural selection through competition powered the progress of humanity. On the other hand, he recognized that this can go too far. While he maintained competition produced the virtues that propelled the species forward, Bagehot reminded his readers that the “progress of *man* requires the cooperation of *men*.”⁴⁹

Like Gronlund and Bagehot, ministers of the Social Gospel used Darwin’s language and ideas to advocate a position in opposition to Social Darwinism. Take, for example, Baptist pastor and social thinker Walter Rauschenbusch, who was the primary theologian of the Social Gospel movement. He wrote of Darwin’s work: “Translate the evolutionary theories into religious faith, and you have the Kingdom of God.”⁵⁰ Rauschenbusch refers to the doctrine of societal progress toward the perfect social order, the Kingdom of God. This ideal of progress inspired Rauschenbusch and ministers like him to crusade for improvement in the social order. Furthermore, the idea of society as an organism lessens the importance of individualism for men like Rauschenbusch. Instead, he writes of social redemption, “binding all men together in strong bonds of trust, helpfulness, purity, and good will.”⁵¹

While he clearly internalized an organic view of society, Rauschenbusch did not adhere to the enshrined ideals of *laissez faire* that the Social Darwinists held. He attacked unregulated competition, writing that “the reign of competition is a reign of fear” and “a reign of fear is never a reign of God.”⁵² This reign of fear brought out the worst in men, making them paranoid and selfish, hardly an evolutionary success story.⁵³ While he conceded that competition was a natural

⁴⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 71, 74.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 74-75.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 212.

⁵⁰ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1919), 90.

⁵¹ Rauschenbusch, 98.

⁵² Ibid., 173.

⁵³ Ibid.

human disposition, he contended that *laissez faire* economic competition was a detriment to society. It “establishes the law of tooth and nail, and brings back the age of savage warfare where every man’s hand is against every man.”⁵⁴ Although he followed the Social Darwinist tendency to accept competition as a natural product of nature, Rauschenbusch writes of dire consequences of setting it on a pedestal. He warned that rather than propel humankind forward, as Spencer and Sumner held, unrestrained competition led to savagery and brutality. In its place, he proposed mutualism and cooperation, in a similar vein to other reforming theorists.

Another prominent Social gospel theorist, Congregationalist minister Washington Gladden rejected the application of struggle for existence to human society. In fact, he displayed an animosity for competition altogether, writing that “competition, as the regulative principle of our industry, has utterly broken down” and that “the competitive regime tends... to produce a race of powerful incarnate selfishness.”⁵⁵ He argued that this amounted to a state of perpetual war, that it caused division, and questioned whether this represented true progress for humanity.⁵⁶ The class conflict that he felt stemmed from the acceptance of nature’s law as man’s law deeply concerned Gladden. The law of survival of the fittest and unrestrained competition was the law of lower creatures, not applicable to man. Instead, man was subject to the “higher spiritual law of sympathy and good-will.”⁵⁷ Gladden rejected the very basis of most Social Darwinist theory and replaced it with a completely different organizing principle, that of the “Christian law” as propounded in works like *Tools and the Man*, *Applied Christianity*, and to a lesser extent in his recollections, major contributors to the Social Gospel. In practice this meant that a form of society should be encouraged which assigned great value to the character and well-being of humanity, and took steps to build this. Gladden held that Christianity could do this, creating a perfect society through creating perfect men. An important facet of this would be the replacement of competition with cooperation:

Its [Christianity’s] work in society may be summed up largely in this statement: it seeks to strengthen the principle of cooperation among men, and hold in check the principle of competition.⁵⁸

Instead of rejoicing in competition and the triumph of “strong” over “weak” individuals, Gladden’s Christian Law called for a society in which people collaboratively built each other up, thereby building up society.

One only has to look at the small spectrum of ideas outlined herein, let alone the tens of thousands of pages of similar theory not discussed in this study, to see the varied uses to which

⁵⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁵ Washington Gladden, *Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1896), 105; Gladden, *Tools and the Man* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1893), 273.

⁵⁶ Gladden, *Applied Christianity*, 113.

⁵⁷ Gladden, *Tools and the Man*, 277.

⁵⁸ Gladden, *Recollections* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), pg. 248-253.

social theorists put the language of Darwinian biology. However, Darwin's work lent itself well to the rhetoric of conflict. *On the Origin of Species* was written in the language of conflict between individual creatures. Small wonder that those who sought to articulate their position in the burgeoning class conflict of the late Gilded Age and Progressive Era would find ammunition for their arguments contained therein. The various usages of Darwinian rhetoric represented attempts to give the weight of science to the rhetoric of class conflict in the United States, at times tempered by a rejection of that usage altogether.

From its inception, Darwinism was social and its premises lent themselves well to social discourse. Whether he intended to or not, Darwin gave mankind a means of understanding itself on a societal level, complete with socio-economic underpinnings, at a critical moment in history. In a period of drastic, confusing transition Darwinism gave perceptive social theorists the tools they needed to build a new edifice upon which to construct organizational theories. As thinkers of different stripes approached the issues brought about by rapid industrial change in the Gilded Age, they developed numerous rich social theories. Some of these drew nearly opposite conclusions from each other and competed for adherents and power. Others built upon their contemporaries' arguments in solidarity. Those thinkers who applied the language of Darwin largely used the same language and ideas though some key concepts and metaphors may have entirely different meanings, applications, and logic, even among thinkers who agreed with each other.

This study is a brief survey of some of the theorists who both used and reacted to the rhetoric of Darwinian biology in social discourse. It serves as a microcosm of the rich theoretical battle over class differences and inequality that took place in that dynamic era of American history. The prominence of Darwinist rhetoric in American social thought begs for our attention; nothing so culturally prominent to an historical period should be dismissed lightly. Understanding the genesis, makeup, and usage of Darwinian language and ideas in social discourse deepens our understanding of American discourse on class in the late Gilded Age and Progressive Era United States.

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