

A SUMMARY OF SOCIAL DARWINISM

Social Darwinism is a loose set of ideologies that emerged in the late 19th century in which Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was used to justify certain political, social, or economic views. Social Darwinism has been used to justify imperialism, racism, eugenics.

In *The Social Organism*, Spencer compares society to a living organism and argues that, just as biological organisms evolve through natural selection, society evolves and increases in complexity through analogous processes. The term *Social Darwinism*, coined in the late 19th century, describes the idea that humans, like animals and plants, compete in a struggle for existence in which natural selection results in "survival of the fittest." Further interpretations moved to ideologies propagating a racist and hierarchical society and provided ground for the later radical versions of Social Darwinism. In 1853, Sumner published a highly influential pamphlet entitled "What Social Classes Owe to Each Other", in which he insisted that the social classes owe each other nothing, synthesizing Darwin's findings with free enterprise Capitalism for his justification. Social Darwinism allowed people to counter the connection of *Thron und Altar*, the intertwined establishment of clergy and nobility, and provided as well the idea of progressive change and evolution of society as a whole. Wilson's critics have alleged that sociobiology is simply another version of social Darwinism. Such ideas also helped to advance euthanasia in Germany, especially *Action T4*, which led to the murder of mentally ill and disabled people in Germany. Some even extended this philosophy into a micro-economic issue, claiming that social welfare programs that helped the poor and disadvantaged were contrary to nature itself. Gandhi attempted to explain the destruction of Greek and Roman civilizations using the very theory. By the end of World War II, social Darwinist and eugenic theories had fallen out of favor in the United States and much of Europe—partly due to their associations with Nazi programs and propaganda, and because these theories were scientifically unfounded. This theory, known as hereditarianism, met considerable resistance, especially in the United States. This form did not envision survival of the fittest within an individualist order of society, but rather advocated a type of racial and national struggle where the state directed human breeding through eugenics. Such criticism has led to a decline in the influence of sociobiology and other forms of social Darwinism. In *Social Statics* and other works, Spencer argued that through competition social evolution would automatically produce prosperity and personal liberty unparalleled in human history. Malthus himself anticipated the social Darwinists in suggesting that charity could exacerbate social problems. In fact, Spencer was not described as a social Darwinist until the 1930s, long after his death. After 1850, social reformers used Darwinism to advocate a stronger role for government and the introduction of various social policies. Galton argued that social morals needed to change so that heredity was a conscious decision in order to avoid both the over-breeding by less fit members of society and the under-breeding of the more fit ones. Darwin, unlike Hobbes, believed that this struggle for natural resources allowed individuals with certain physical and mental traits to succeed more frequently than others, and that these traits accumulated in the population over time, which under certain conditions could lead to the descendants being so different that they would be defined as a new species. In many animal societies, "struggle is replaced by co-operation". At the time that Spencer began to promote Social Darwinism, the technology, economy, and government of the "White European" was advanced in comparison to that of other cultures. Galton proposed to better humankind by propagating the British elite. By shifting the emphasis away from biology and onto culture, these anthropologists undermined social Darwinism's biological foundations. The Nazis targeted certain groups or races that they considered biologically inferior for extermination. Sociologists and biologists who criticized hereditarianism believed that changes in the environment could produce physical changes in the individual that would be passed on to future generations, a theory proposed by French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck in the early 19th century. In that book, for example, the author argued that as an increasing population would normally outgrow its food supply, this would result in the starvation of the weakest and a Malthusian catastrophe. Thomas Hobbes's 17th century portrayal of the state of nature seems analogous to the competition for natural resources described by Darwin. The Enlightenment thinkers who preceded Darwin, such as Hegel, often argued that societies progressed through stages of increasing development.