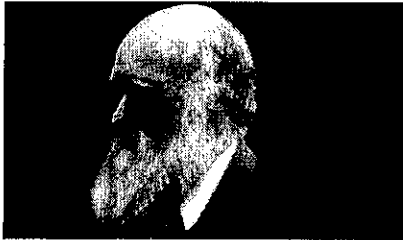


Capitalism and Western Civilization: Social Darwinism

Apr 19, 2012 | William H. Young



In "The Rebirth of Social Darwinism" (*Huffington Post*, December 1, 2011), California, Berkeley political economist Robert Reich pronounced Republican presidential candidates not conservatives, but "regressives." "The America they seek is the one we had in the Gilded Age" when "social Darwinism offered a moral justification for the wild inequities and social cruelties of the late nineteenth century." "Government should do little or nothing to help those in need because that would interfere with natural selection," of which "millionaires are the product." Let's examine the roots and history of such criticism.

American high school history textbooks have long propagated the idea that the late nineteenth century was one of capitalist "social Darwinism": *laissez-faire* individualism and economic competition leading to the "survival of the fittest" and unacceptable natural inequality. The textbook used by my granddaughter in 2008, *United States History: In the Course of Human Events* (1997), claims that "one after another, intellectuals revolted against" and "would free people from the constraints of social Darwinism," citing *Dynamic Sociology* (1883) by Frank Lester Ward.

The term "social Darwinism" refers to the deterministic philosophy of Englishman Herbert Spencer that applied, to humans and markets, Darwinian biological and evolutionary concepts of natural selection. Spencer offered his philosophical defense of individualism and *laissez faire* in *Social Statics* (1851). He coined the term "survival of the fittest" in *Principles of Biology* (1867), arguing that human progress resulted from the triumph of superior individuals and cultures over their inferior competitors; poverty was evidence of inferiority. Anything that interfered with the self-improvement of superior individuals or markets was to be resisted. What came to be called "social Darwinism" was used to argue for unrestrained economic competition and against aid to the unfit poor. The state was not to hinder the strong or assist the weak, interceding only to protect individual freedom and rights. The theory was used wrongly by others to justify racist and imperialistic policies in Europe and America.

The modern disparaging use of the term stems from progressive historian Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), which portrays a Gilded Age in which Spencer's applied ideology justified cut-throat competition in unrestrained capitalism and refusal of indiscriminate charity for the weak and nonworking poor that would make them dependent. But an essay by John G. West ("Darwin's Public Policy," in John Marini and Ken Masugi, *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science*, 2005) shows that later historians have demonstrated that Hofstadter magnified the views of a small number of social scientists (such as William Graham Sumner) and corporate titans (such as Andrew Carnegie) of

the time in order to undermine the moral legitimacy of American capitalism and justify the expansion of limited government by progressivism to control our economy after World War II. The depiction of social Darwinism was used most widely by detractors of capitalism, such as academic reformers of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, ironically having only limited acquaintance with the real economic world. "All the leading muckrakers sensed that there was no better way to discredit a businessman than to portray him as a renegade of the jungle."

But social Darwinism was not the belief system of nineteenth-century American businessmen in general. In fact, they rejected views such as those of Carnegie and instead praised free enterprise and vigorous competition—the *laissez faire*, moral sense, and reciprocity doctrines of Adam Smith. Far from believing that commerce was immoral or ruthless, they argued that business was based on "good character." West quotes historian Irwin G. Wyllie, who, in an address to the *American Philosophical Society* on the Centennial of Darwin's *Origin of Species* ("Social Darwinism and the Businessman," April 1959), observes that

anyone who examines the voluminous nineteenth-century literature of business success cannot fail to be impressed that businessmen who talked about success and failure took their texts from Christian moralists...In the race for wealth they attributed...paramount influence to industry, frugality, and sobriety—simple moral virtues that any man could cultivate...The problem of success was not that of grinding down one's competitors, but of elevating one's self—and the two were not equivalent.

According to John Steele Gordon in *An Empire of Wealth* (2004), *The New York Times* applied the epithet *robber barons* to the men (Carnegie, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and others) who built great industrial and transportation empires in the late-nineteenth-century economy by outperforming their competition, often putting smaller, less-efficient competitors out of business. Reflecting human nature, some of these men were capable of ruthlessness, dishonesty, and self-aggrandizement; others were honest men who scrupulously stayed within what were often inadequate laws. None of them merely transferred wealth to themselves from others by their activities. All built vast wealth-creating enterprises that lowered product prices, created millions of wage-paying jobs, expanded economic growth, and raised the standard of living of America.

Jeffrey Williamson and Peter Lindert establish, in *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (1980), that between 1820 and 1900, American per-capita incomes *quadrupled* because of economic growth, greatly raising the standard of living. Many married women and their children were freed from work and were educated. Over the same period, mainly before 1860, natural inequality—characteristic of an industrializing economy with entrepreneurs creating new wealth by employing increasingly educated, skilled, and better-paid workers—grew. After the Civil War, there was no further inequality growth, contrary to what is taught in history books about industrialization. The rate of growth of inequality was actually *declining* at the end of the nineteenth century. State investment in public education was beginning to pay off.

The *Oxford Companion to United States History* (2001) also comments that the Gilded Age

came to be remembered as a time of corrupt and issueless politics, corporate domination, and oppressive treatment of the less fortunate....In the last quarter of the twentieth century, historical research revised the inherited stereotypical picture of the Gilded Age. Judging the period more on its own terms than from the perspective of the New Deal Era and the Great Society, historians reappraised the record of the post-Civil War political and industrial system to produce a more nuanced assessment. They described the era's constructive accomplishments as well as its inequities and excesses...not just a flawed forerunner to the Progressive Era but an equally important time with its own unique problems and achievements....On balance, the era's material, political, and cultural accomplishments far overshadow its deficiencies and faults.

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker explains, in *The Blank Slate* (2003), that at the end of the nineteenth century, a different view of human nature began to be developed in order to establish a social order in which immutable forces of biology—genes and unequal traits—would *play no role* in accounting for the behavior of individuals and social groups. Reformers would

overcome rule by superior white (Nordic) individuals over oppressed groups by refashioning theories of mind to make classism, racism, or sexism as untenable as possible—culture over nature.

That concept would evolve over the twentieth century to the denial of human nature and to social constructionism, which would become the theme of twentieth-century American social science, progressivism, and postmodern multiculturalism. In social constructionism (see my article *Human Nature and Western Civilization*), inequality arises entirely from society rather than from within the individual. Thus, all inequality can be cured by redistributing income from the “rich” (those within the upper middle class, not just the top 1 percent) to the less-well-off and by sending everyone to college as advocated by *A Crucible Moment*.

President Obama himself has now called Republican policy proposals “thinly veiled social Darwinism.” (The White House, *Remarks by the President to the Associated Press Luncheon*, April 3, 2012) History does not warrant acceptance of that epithet as a valid characterization of capitalism or its supporters.

Next week’s article will address fairness and opportunity.

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This is one of a series of occasional articles applying the lessons of Western civilization to contemporary issues relevant to the academy.

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