

Social Un-Darwinism

How does society relate to nature in an evolutionary perspective?



DOUGLAS ALLCHIN, DEPARTMENT EDITOR

It is time to rescue Darwinism from the dismal shadow of Social Darwinism. According to this now widely-discredited doctrine, human society is governed by “the survival of the fittest.” Competition reigns unchecked. Individualism erodes any effort to cooperate. Ethics and morality become irrelevant. Some contend that social competition is the very engine of human “progress,” and hence any effort to regulate it cannot be justified. Others accept competition as inevitable, even though they don’t like it or do not endorse it ideologically. They seem persuaded that we cannot escape its “reality.” Natural selection, many reason, is . . . well, “natural.” “Natural,” hence inviolable: What recourse could humans possibly have against the laws of nature? Thus even people from divergent backgrounds seem to agree that this view of society unavoidably follows from evolution. Creationists, not surprisingly, parade it as reason to reject Darwinism outright (Bergman 2006). By contrast, as resolute an evolutionist as Thomas Henry Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog,” invoked similar implications even while he urged his audience to transcend them morally (1894/1989). Yet the core assumptions of so called “Social Darwinism” are unwarranted. Why does it continue to haunt us? The time has come to dislodge this entrenched belief, this sacred bovine: that nature somehow dictates a fundamentally individualistic and competitive society.

Unraveling the flawed argument behind Social Darwinism also yields a more general – and much more important – lesson about the nature of science. Here, the historical argument seemed to enlist science to portray certain cultural perspectives as “facts” of nature. *Naturalizing* cultural ideas in this way is all too easy. Cultural contexts seem to remain invisible to those within the culture itself, sometimes scientists, too. The case of Social Darwinism – not Darwinism at all – illustrates vividly how appeals to science can go awry. We might thus learn how to notice, and to remedy or guard against such errors in other cases.

“Social Darwinism” Without Darwin

Ironically, the basic doctrine now labeled Social Darwinism did not originate with Darwin himself. Darwin

DOUGLAS ALLCHIN has taught both high school and college biology and now teaches History of Science at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455; e-mail: allch001@umn.edu. He is a Fellow at the Minnesota Center for the Philosophy of Science and edits the SHiPS Resource Center (ships.umn.edu). He hikes, photographs lichen, and enjoys tea.

was no Social Darwinist. Quite the contrary: Darwin opened the way for understanding how a moral society can evolve (last month’s *Sacred Bovines*). Indeed, by Darwin’s era, the notion of unregulated selfishness as a “natural” condition that threatened social order was centuries-old.

In the mid-1600s, for example, Thomas Hobbes described the primitive state of nature as “*bellum omnium contra omnes*”: a war of each against all. For him, supreme individualism (if left unchecked) would eclipse sociality. Even genuine benevolence seemed impossible. In Hobbes’s cynical “spin,” generosity was really disguised self-interest:

For no man giveth but with intention of good to himself; because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts the object is to every man his own good.
(1651/1962, p. 118)

Hobbes’s proposed solution was to imagine a social contract. If everyone agreed mutually to limit self-serving behavior, all would benefit. “If.” As in a legal system, who enforced the contract? One would need a moral authority outside or above the system (for Hobbes, it was the King). The dilemma of cheaters and the warrant for authority – the lack of moral grounding – was the same that critics of evolution now fault in Social Darwinism. And it resulted from the same basic assumptions: individualism and the “war of nature” – all posited without (and well before) Darwin.

Social Darwinist perspectives were also expressed by Thomas Malthus in his 1798 “Essay on the Principle of Population” and in its many subsequent editions. For Malthus, population would forever increase ahead of the ability to feed it. The “natural inequality” of population and production, he claimed, confuted romantic ideals (then prevalent) of social improvement:

Necessity, that imperious all pervading law of nature, restrains them [the seeds of life] within the prescribed bounds. The race of plants and the race of animals shrink under this great restrictive law. And the race of man cannot, by any efforts of reason, escape from it. Among plants and animals its effects are waste of seed, sickness, and premature death. Among mankind, misery and vice.

No fancied equality, no agrarian regulations in their utmost extent, could remove the pressure of it even for a single century. And it appears, therefore, to be decisive against the possible existence of a society, all the members of which, should live in ease, happiness, and comparative leisure; and feel no anxiety about providing the means of subsistence for themselves and families.”
(1798/1959, pp. 5-6)



For Malthus, limited resources led to competition. A “struggle for existence,” as he phrased it, was inescapable. Both Malthus and Hobbes hoped for a solution, of course. But they could do little more than appeal to awareness and self-restraint, at odds with their very assumptions. Assumptions of individualism lead to conclusions of individualism, no surprise.

Malthus also went significantly further. He viewed efforts to alleviate poverty as only further compounding the problem of population. He thus recommended abandoning the Poor Laws as useless. (He did not explain why, meanwhile, the wealthy should keep their ease and “comparative leisure.”) Here, the “war of nature” had acquired a new ideological stance. Idealized values now permeated observed facts – but only by sidestepping the customary need for moral justification. Malthus’s cultural values became disguised as a scientific conclusion.

In all this, Darwin was nowhere yet present. Social Darwinism thus seems grossly misnamed. Views about inherent social competition and/or humans as subject to some “war of nature” should be called, more appropriately, *Hobbism* or *Malthusianism*.

The possibility of Social Darwinism without Darwin only amplifies the puzzle of why Darwin’s name should be associated with the doctrine. One may begin to see that Social Darwinism is not a social application of Darwinism, so much as an effort to “Darwinize” a social ideology. That is, the claims about society were never derived from science. Rather, proponents of a particular cultural perspective appealed to Darwin and science seeking authority for their views.

Appropriating Nature Through Darwin

The introduction of Darwin’s (and Alfred Wallace’s) concept of natural selection did indeed significantly alter political discourse. But not because there were suddenly new ideas about humans or society. Rather, what changed was how the already existing ideas were justified. Those who believed in Hobbism or Malthusianism readily interpreted Darwin’s new perspective as further exemplifying their views. They appealed to crude analogies and misplaced Darwinian-type arguments to argue that competition was both “natural” and “progressive.” Natural improvement, they implied, trumped any other moral arguments. That is, they endeavored to *naturalize* their social doctrine. This pattern of reasoning, shared by a cluster of thinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, later prompted historian Richard Hofstadter to coin the very term “Social Darwinism” (1955, p. 6).

Hofstadter’s “Social Darwinists” were misled in two primary, related ways. First, their analogy from nature to society did not, ultimately, follow Darwin’s arguments at all. The socialized version of “survival of the fittest” was biologically flawed. Second, they mistakenly viewed adaptation to local environmental conditions as progress, or improvement, on some imagined scale of abstract value. They erred scientifically – not just by layering values on facts, as commonly noted. To guide students away from succumbing to these same mistakes, biology teachers need to understand the errors fully – and perhaps how easily the unwary can slip into them.

The first error was the looseness with which they applied Darwinian principles to society. They did not fully consider the structure of selection in social environments. The relationship seems simple enough. After all, Darwin and Wallace had both

capitalized on an analogy *from society to nature* in first conceiving natural selection. Their insights were each triggered by reading Malthus and applying his social “struggle for existence” to organisms. For them, however, it was a guiding analogy only: a template or scaffolding soon girded with biological principles and observations (Darwin 1859, Chap. 3).

By contrast, the reverse analogy of the Social Darwinists, *from nature to society*, fails. For example, political power and economic class are not biological traits. Social stratification is not the result of differential survival, or differential reproduction, even metaphorically. Privileged variants are not genetically based. Nor is it even clear *what* is selected. Moreover, humans actively shape the environment. Social “selection” is an indirect amalgam of human choices. In the casual social analogy, therefore, neither the heritable units, nor the sources of variation, nor the units of selection, nor selection itself fit Darwinian patterns. Natural selection does not map onto social politics.

A closer analogy, if any, might be Darwin’s *Artificial Selection*. But that clearly strips the analogy of its “natural” context. Social “selection” is not fixed by circumstances beyond our control. We choose. Sociality, as Darwin hinted in *Descent of Man*, introduces a distinct set of dynamics based on behavior and interorganismal transfer of information. Cultural evolution follows its own principles, shaped by learning and the activity of minds. The Social Darwinists’ concept that some individual humans are objectively fit while the poor or indigent are unfit is utterly misframed. The whole analogy – and the ideological justification that relies on it – collapses. The historical Social Darwinism was *scientifically* misguided and unwarranted. No wonder perhaps that the major advocates of the doctrine were not scientists, but a social elite who would benefit if the purported “science” legitimated their power.

The second critical error of Social Darwinist thinking was subtly inscribing a human value into nature. Adaptation through natural selection seemed, through human eyes, progressive. –And who could argue against progress? As biologists well know, however, evolution is not uniformly progressive on some absolute scale. Context is essential. “Fit” organisms thus vary from location to location and from time to time. Competition in nature does not lead to a generalized “improvement,” measurable abstractly. In the social context, arguments about competition obscure the significance of particular contexts and consequences. Amidst the confusion, a vague and ill defined “progress” seems, like a trump card, to eclipse the relevant arguments. The view that Darwinian variation and selection itself was inherently “progressive” was not independent of the cultural value of that concept.

Confusion may also arise in part due to anthropomorphism of the term “selection.” The word seems to imply that natural selection is a choice, rather than the effect of nonintentional causes. Survival and reproduction are not “values,” any more than falling acorns express a “value” of gravity, or oppositely charged ions a “value” of electrical attraction. Intention and moral agency come ultimately from minds. As flexible adapted structures, brains can develop and recognize many values. The process of evolution itself, however, does not exhibit intent or values, even if certain organisms are “selected.”

The Naturalizing Error

Both Social Darwinist errors appeared in the work of self-made philosopher and social commentator Herbert Spencer

(1851, 1852a, 1852b, 1864). Spencer presented evolution as due to a natural unfolding from simple to complex. Incoherent homogeneity developed into integrated heterogeneity. Hence, he used – and popularized – the misleading term “evolution,” which means, literally, to unroll. Spencer’s evolution, unlike Darwin’s descent with modification, was inherently progressive. Further, Spencer appealed to that view to defend a “hands-off” social policy. Abolish the Poor Laws, he urged, because they interfere with “natural” progress.

Spencer also blurred the organic/social distinction. Using one grand unified scheme, he espoused continuity from physiological adaptation to individual mental development to the history of societies and their institutions. For him, society was nature, merely at a more “advanced” stage.

Spencer’s universal principle of unfolding progress and his biologizing of society inspired many to condemn social welfare and, especially in America, to argue that capitalism ought not to be regulated. Today, Spencer’s ideas lay in disrepute. But his historical influence was immense. His works were read far more widely than Darwin’s. Over 600,000 copies of his books were sold. Hofstadter’s Social Darwinists were thus largely *Spencerists*. Accordingly, the effort to naturalize a laissez-faire social policy might well be called *Spencerism*.

Spencer’s work was eventually criticized by philosopher G.E. Moore (1903). Moore faulted Spencer’s appeal to natural events and processes as an implicit model. Nature was not a source of values. It was *ethically* unwarranted. Moore called it “the naturalistic fallacy.” Moore did not really address the biology. For all he cared, the claims about a naturalized society might nonetheless be *descriptively* warranted! He thus mistook the principal error. Spencerism was not just a lapse of *moral* reasoning. Rather, it was faulty *scientific* reasoning. Spencer was trying to inscribe cultural views into “nature” – what one may call, instead, “*the naturalizing error*.” (On naturalizing cultural concepts of male and female, consult *Sacred Bovines*, Aug., 2006.) Nowadays, few endorse Spencerism, but many imagine it to be true. They escape Moore’s naturalistic fallacy in ethics, but succumb to the naturalizing error in science. Spencer’s social analogies were *biologically* unwarranted. Adjusting modern popular beliefs thus involves, as an initial step, nurturing a proper biological understanding of the origins of society and culture (last month’s *Sacred Bovines*).

Given the risk of the naturalizing error, how does one maintain the integrity of science? Perhaps one might want to isolate facts and values and never let them mix. Yet scientific findings frequently inform our judgments. We disregard the relevance of facts to values at our cost. The challenge, rather, is to focus on the justification. “Follow the values.” Be alert to the cultural contexts of “facts.” Tracing the source of the values, for example, may help decide whether “scientific” claims are responsible or reflect cultural bias. In the case of evolution and society, the pattern was clear to Frederick Engels, who commented on them in an 1875 letter:

The whole Darwinist teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes’s doctrine of bellum omnium contra omnes and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus’s theory of population. When this conjurer’s trick had been performed . . . the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved. The puerility of this procedure is so obvious that not a word need be said about it.

(Quoted in Lewontin, Rose & Kamin, 1979, p. 309)

“Not a word” may have been needed for Engels’ correspondent. But for students unfamiliar with the history and nature of science, a full explanation is surely much needed, if not essential. The Social Darwinists drew inappropriately on the imprimatur of science. For them, Darwin was nothing more than a convenient form of social justification. They were never scientific. – And it is the masquerade as science that matters most deeply.

Guarding the Integrity of Science

There is nothing essentially Darwinian about Social Darwinism. Darwin did not endorse it. The beliefs can—and did—exist without Darwin. The pattern of thinking is not Darwinian, though borrowing its terminology. There might be a Darwinian approach to society – indeed, as sketched by Darwin himself – but not based on an ideological framework.

Social Darwinism (as commonly understood) is a pernicious misnomer. The very name defames science, especially Darwinian concepts, by portraying an ill-informed cultural interpretation of science as an extension of science itself. We should purge the phrase from our lexicon. We should challenge it as inappropriate everywhere and every time it is mentioned. We should, instead, talk about the social doctrines of Hobbes, Malthus, and Spencer – and the dangers of the naturalizing error exemplified in their views.

Spencerian errors, of course, persist in our time. Why? The most significant contributor, I suspect, may be another ostensibly Darwinian phrase, “survival of the fittest.” A mere four words seem to embody the whole naturalizing analogy; apparently describing nature and society equally and guaranteeing the best outcome. Interpreting this prospective nemesis is yet another important challenge, addressed in next month’s *Sacred Bovines*.

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