

# Social Darwinism

## I. Introduction

**Social Darwinism**, term coined in the late 19th century to describe the idea that humans, like animals and plants, compete in a struggle for existence in which [natural selection](#) results in "survival of the fittest." Social Darwinists base their beliefs on theories of evolution developed by British naturalist [Charles Darwin](#). Some social Darwinists argue that governments should not interfere with human competition by attempting to regulate the economy or cure social ills such as poverty. Instead, they advocate a [laissez-faire](#) political and economic system that favors competition and self-interest in social and business affairs. Social Darwinists typically deny that they advocate a "law of the jungle." But most propose arguments that justify imbalances of power between individuals, races, and nations because they consider some people more fit to survive than others.

The term *social Darwinist* is applied loosely to anyone who interprets human society primarily in terms of biology, struggle, competition, or [natural law](#) (a philosophy based on what are considered the permanent characteristics of human nature). Social Darwinism characterizes a variety of past and present social policies and theories, from attempts to reduce the power of government to theories exploring the biological causes of human behavior. Many people believe that the concept of social Darwinism explains the philosophical rationalization behind [racism](#), [imperialism](#), and [capitalism](#). The term has negative implications for most people because they consider it a rejection of compassion and social responsibility.

## II. Origins

Social Darwinism originated in Britain during the second half of the 19th century. Darwin did not address human evolution in his most famous study, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which focused on the evolution of plants and animals. He applied his theories of natural selection specifically to people in *The Descent of Man* (1871), a work that critics interpreted as justifying cruel social policies at home and imperialism abroad. The Englishman most associated with early social Darwinism, however, was sociologist [Herbert Spencer](#). Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" to describe the outcome of competition between social groups. In *Social Statics* (1850) and other works, Spencer argued that through competition social evolution would automatically produce prosperity and personal liberty unparalleled in human history.

In the United States, Spencer gained considerable support among intellectuals

and some businessmen, including steel manufacturer [Andrew Carnegie](#), who served as Spencer's host during his visit to the United States in 1883. The most prominent American social Darwinist of the 1880s was [William Graham Sumner](#), who on several occasions told audiences that there was no alternative to the "survival of the fittest" theory. Critics of social Darwinism seized on these comments to argue that Sumner advocated a "dog-eat-dog" philosophy of human behavior that justified oppressive social policies. Some later historians have argued that Sumner's critics took his statements out of context and misrepresented his views.

### III. Hereditarianism

Studies of [heredity](#) contributed another variety of social Darwinism in the late 19th century. In *Hereditary Genius* (1869), [Sir Francis Galton](#), a British scientist and Darwin's cousin, argued that biological inheritance is far more important than environment in determining character and intelligence. This theory, known as hereditarianism, met considerable resistance, especially in the United States. 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. After 1890, hereditarianism gained increasing support, due in part to the work of German biologist [August Weismann](#). Weismann reemphasized the role of natural selection by arguing that a person's characteristics are determined genetically at conception.

### IV. The Struggle School

Toward the end of the 19th century, another strain of social Darwinism was developed by supporters of the struggle school of sociology. English journalist Walter Bagehot expressed the fundamental ideas of the struggle school in *Physics and Politics* (1872), a book that describes the historical evolution of social groups into nations. Bagehot argued that these nations evolved principally by succeeding in conflicts with other groups. For many political scientists, sociologists, and military strategists, this strain of social Darwinism justified overseas expansion by nations (imperialism) during the 1890s. In the United States, historian [John Fiske](#) and naval strategist [Alfred Thayer Mahan](#) drew from the principles of social Darwinism to advocate foreign expansion and the creation of a strong military.

### V. Reform Darwinism

After 1890, social reformers used Darwinism to advocate a stronger role for government and the introduction of various social policies. This movement became known as reform Darwinism. Reform Darwinists argued that human

beings need new ideas and institutions as they adapt to changing conditions. For example, U.S. Supreme Court Justice [Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.](#) reasoned that the [Constitution of the United States](#) should be reinterpreted in light of changing circumstances in American society.

Some reformers used the principles of evolution to justify sexist and racist ideas that undercut their professed belief in equality. For example, the most extreme type of reform Darwinism was [eugenics](#), a term coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 from the Greek word *eūgenáiv*, meaning well-born. Eugenists claimed that particular racial or social groups—usually wealthy Anglo-Saxons—were "naturally" superior to other groups. They proposed to control human heredity by passing laws that forbid marriage between races or that restrict breeding for various social "misfits" such as criminals or the mentally ill.

## **VI. Social Darwinism in the 20th Century**

Although social Darwinism was highly influential at the beginning of the 20th century, it rapidly lost popularity and support after World War I (1914-1918). During the 1920s and 1930s many political observers blamed it for contributing to German militarism and the rise of Nazism (see [National Socialism](#)). During this same period, advances in anthropology also discredited social Darwinism. German American anthropologist [Franz Boas](#) and American anthropologists [Margaret Mead](#) and [Ruth Benedict](#) showed that human [culture](#) sets people apart from animals. By shifting the emphasis away from biology and onto culture, these anthropologists undermined social Darwinism's biological foundations. Eugenics was discredited by a better understanding of genetics and eventually disgraced by Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler's use of eugenic arguments to create a "master race." During World War II (1939-1945), the Nazis killed several million Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and members of other groups, believing them inferior to an idealized [Aryan race](#).

Social theories based on biology gained renewed support after 1953, when American biologist [James Watson](#) and British biologist [Francis Crick](#) successfully described the structure of the [DNA](#) molecule, the building block of all life. During the 1960s anthropologists interested in the influence of DNA on human behavior produced studies of the biological basis of aggression, territoriality, mate selection, and other behavior common to people and animals. Books on this theme, such as Desmond Morris's *Naked Ape* (1967) and Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* (1969), became best-sellers. In the early 1970s American psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein revived the social Darwinist argument that intelligence is mostly determined by biology rather than by environmental influences.

During the 1960s, British biologist W. D. Hamilton and American biologist Robert L. Trivers produced separate studies showing that the self-sacrificing

behavior of some members of a group serves the genetic well-being of the group as a whole. American biologist [Edward O. Wilson](#) drew on these theories in *Sociobiology: the New Synthesis* (1975), where he argued that genetics exerts a greater influence on human behavior than scientists had previously believed. Wilson claimed that human behavior cannot be understood without taking both biology and culture into account. Wilson's views became the foundations of a new science—sociobiology—and were later popularized in such studies as Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Wilson's critics have alleged that sociobiology is simply another version of social Darwinism. They claim that it downplays the role of culture in human societies and justifies poverty and warfare in the name of natural selection. Such criticism has led to a decline in the influence of sociobiology and other forms of social Darwinism.

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