



"VITAL ARTICLES ON SCIENCE/CREATION"

March 2001

Impact #333 DARWIN'S INFLUENCE ON RUTHLESS LAISSEZ-FAIRE CAPITALISM

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Abstract

A review of the writings of several leading "robber baron" capitalists shows that many of them were influenced by the Darwinian view that the strong eventually will overcome the weak. Their faith in Darwinism helped them to justify this view as morally right and completely natural. As a result, they thought that their ruthless (and often unethical or even illegal) business practices were justified by science, and that Darwinistic concepts and conclusions were an inevitable part of the "unfolding of history," and for this reason were justified.

Introduction

The Darwinian worldview was critical, not only in influencing the development of Nazism and communism, but also in the rise of the ruthless capitalists that flourished in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Morris and Morris, 1996). A key aspect of this brand of capitalism was its extreme individualism which indicated that other persons count for little, and that it is both natural and proper to exploit "weaker" companies. The so-called robber barons often concluded that their behavior was justified by natural law and was the inevitable outcome of history (Josephson, 1934). Many were raised as Christians, but rejected their Christianity or modified it to include their socialist/Darwinian ideas. Gertrude Himmelfarb noted that Darwinism may have been accepted in England in part because it justified the greed of certain people.

The theory of natural selection, it is said, could only have originated in England, because only laissez-faire England provided the atomistic, egotistic mentality necessary to its conception. Only there could Darwin have blandly assumed that the basic unit was the individual, the basic instinct self-interest, and the basic activity struggle. Spengler, describing the *Origin* as: "the application of economics to biology," said that it reeked of the atmosphere of the English factory . . . natural selection

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arose . . . in England because it was a perfect expression of Victorian “greed-philosophy” of the capitalist ethic and Manchester economics (1962, p. 418).

Rachels noted that “the survival of the fittest” theory in biology was quickly interpreted by capitalists as “an ethical precept that sanctioned cutthroat economic competition” (1990, p. 63, see also Hsü, 1986, p. 10). Julian Huxley and H. B. D. Kettlewell even concluded that social Darwinism “led to the glorification of free enterprise, *laissez-faire* economics and war, to an unscientific eugenics and racism, and eventually to Hitler and Nazi ideology” (in Huxley and Kettlewell, 1965, p. 81).

Ruthless Capitalism

Darwinism helped to justify not only the ruthless exploits of the communists, but also the ruthless practices of capitalist monopolists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. Kenneth Hsü (1986, p. 534) noted:

Darwinism was also used in a defense of competitive individualism and its economic corollary of *laissez-faire* capitalism in England and in America.

Like Stalin, Marx, Lenin, and Hitler, Carnegie also once accepted Christianity, but abandoned it for Darwinism and became a close friend of the famous social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer. Carnegie stated in his autobiography that when he and several of his friends came to doubt the teachings of Christianity,

. . . including the supernatural element, and indeed the whole scheme of salvation through vicarious atonement and all the fabric built upon it, I came fortunately upon Darwin’s and Spencer’s works. . . . I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear. Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution. “All is well since all grows better” became my motto, my true source of comfort. Man was not created with an instinct for his own degradation, but from the lower he had risen to the higher forms. Nor is there any conceivable end to his march to perfection (1920, p. 327).

Carnegie’s conclusions were best summarized when he said:

the law of competition, be it benign or not, is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department (quoted in Hsü, 1986, p. 10).

John D. Rockefeller reportedly once said that the “growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest . . . the working out of a law of nature . . .” (Ghent, 1902, p. 29). The Rockefellers, while maintaining a Christian front, fully embraced evolution and dismissed the Bible’s early books as mythology (Taylor, 1991, p. 386). When a philanthropist pledged \$10,000 to help found a university named after William Jennings Bryan, John D. Rockefeller Jr. retaliated the very same day with a \$1,000,000 donation to the openly anti-creationist University of Chicago Divinity School (Larson, 1997, p. 183). Morris and Morris noted that the philosophy expressed by Rockefeller also was embraced not only by railroad magnate James Hill, but probably most other capitalists of his day (1996, p. 87). Morris and Morris have suggested that many modern evolutionists:

. . . deplore the excess of the social Darwinism. The fact is, however, that it [Darwinism] became very popular among the *laissez-faire* capitalists of the

19th century because it did, indeed, seem to give scientific sanction to ruthless competition in both business and politics (p. 83).

Morris and Morris also noted that both the left wing Marxist-Leninism and the right wing ruthless capitalists were anti-creationists and “even when they fight with each other, they remain united in opposition to creationism . . .” (p. 82). Many capitalists did not discard their Christianity, but instead tried to blend it with Darwinism. The result was a compromise somewhat like theistic evolution. Although most American businessmen were probably not consciously social Darwinists,

. . . they attributed such success as they had to their industry and virtue, rather than their achievement in trampling on their less successful competitors. After all, most of them saw themselves as Christians, adhering to the rules of “love thy neighbor” and “do as you would be done by.” So, even though they sought to achieve the impossible by serving God and Mammon simultaneously, they found no difficulty in accommodating Christianity to the Darwinian ideas of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, and by no means all of them consciously thought of themselves as being in a state of economic warfare with their fellow manufacturers (Oldroyd, 1980, p. 216).

Several studies have documented the important contribution of Darwin to laissez-faire capitalism: An analysis of the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission (1902–1903) hearings found:

“. . . the coal trust preached a social Darwinist ideology, conflating ‘survival of the fittest’ with freedom and individual rights” (Doukas, 1997, p. 367). This study concluded that “the popularity of social Darwinism in the US national ideology should be comprehended as an innovation of corporate capitalism” (Doukas, 1997, p. 367).

Rosenthal (1997) showed that, historically, biogenetic doctrines had the effect of promoting an attitude of acceptance of the problems of racism, sexism, war, and capitalism. The field of biogenetics has offered no new scientific evidence that human social behavior has a biogenetic basis, or that business/social competition, male dominance, aggression, territoriality, xenophobia, and even patriotism, warfare, and genocide are genetically based human universals. Yet biogenetic doctrines have occupied a prominent place throughout most of American sociological history. Rosenthal noted that Cooley, Sorokin, Sumner, Ross, and even Park adhered to biological racist doctrines that in the past have signaled and encouraged reactionary social policy.

Darwinism Persists Today in Business

The Darwinian concept, applied to business, still is very much with us today. Robert Blake and his co-authors in their 1996 book, *Corporate Darwinism*, attempted to apply modern Darwinism to business. They concluded that business evolves in very predictable ways, specifically in defined stages very much like the stages of human evolution. This “business evolution” is natural; business in keeping with Darwinian principles either swallows the competition, or finds that it will be swallowed by that competition.

Summary

Darwin's ideas played a critically important role in the development and growth, not only of Nazism and communism, but also of the ruthless form of capitalism as best illustrated by the robber barons. While it is difficult to conclude confidently that ruthless capitalism would not have blossomed as it did if Darwin had not developed his evolution theory, it is clear that if Carnegie, Rockefeller, and others had continued to embrace the unadulterated Judeo-Christian worldview of their youth and had not become Darwinists, capitalism would not have become as ruthless as it did in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Morris and Morris (p. 84) have suggested that other motivations (including greed, ambition, even a type of a missionary zeal) stimulated the fierce, unprincipled robber baron business practices long before Darwin. Darwinism, however, gave capitalism an *apparent* scientific rationale that allowed it to be taken to the extremes that were so evident in the early parts of last century.

Acknowledgments: I want to thank Bert Thompson, Ph.D., Wayne Frair, Ph.D., and John Woodmorappe, M.A., for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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