CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVOLUTION, NATURALISM, AND SOCIAL DARWINISM

That society had evolved from simple to complex, or through a series of predetermined stages, was a fundamental postulate of a great variety of social theories. Saint-Simon and Comte had hypothesized a law of historical development that society passed through successive stages. The conservatives had fostered an organic image of social functions and an evolutionary view of the history of nations through the slow growth of precedents and traditions. Hegel had imagined a great, cosmic story of universal evolution driven by principles inherent in the world. In conservative theory, evolution justified the existence of social institutions that liberal rationalists had condemned as unjust, unnecessary, and undesirable. Marx had brought the dialectic down to earth, but the notion of ‘hidden impulse’ still drove his theory of the evolution of history.

It appeared that the ancient analogy that society was like a biological organism had a solid foundation in fact. As sociology emerged in the late nineteenth century, evolution and organicism were adopted as central theoretical concepts. The great intellectual challenge occurred when the principle of evolution was applied to the natural history of the universe and to the origin and development of life on earth. Traditionalists balked because of a threat they perceived to religious dogma. The Victorian age is synchronous with the attack of science on religion. Well into the twentieth century, however, scientists were still disputing the mechanisms underlying evolution. In the context of intellectual and popular controversy, evolution, particularly Darwinism, shaped the imagination of the age.

THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION

As in so many instances, ancient Greek philosophers anticipated the debate between those who claimed that evolution had occurred by chance and those who believed in the immutability of species. According to Aristotle, Empedocles had advocated the theory of random change (Box 11.1).\(^1\) During the earliest period of ancient Greek science, many natural philosophers believed that nature changed over time, old species died out and new ones appeared, and humans ‘originally came from the animal kingdom’.\(^2\) Although he believed that the world was ancient, Aristotle claimed that it had neither a beginning in time nor an end and that everything had always existed as it was. According to his anti-evolutionary theory, all species of life were immutable—they had always existed in an unchanged form. Each species could be arranged on a ‘great ladder’ from the lowest to the highest, with humanity at the top, fixed in position for eternity.

\(^1\) Aristotle, quoted in W. Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 201–4. I am indebted to Susan Haley for bringing this ancient debate to my attention.

\(^2\) Herbert Wendt, In Search of Adam (New York: Collier, 1963), 40.
Aristotle: Divine Planning not Random Evolution

According to Aristotle, Empedocles had argued that, in the first stage of the formation of living creatures, various parts of animals existed separately and were not at first connected together: ‘On the earth many heads sprang up without necks, arms wandered bereft of shoulders, and eyes strayed alone in need of foreheads.’ It was a bizarre image. These wandering parts longed to combine with one another so, in a second stage, various limbs and organs ‘came together as each happened to meet’, entirely by chance. As the body fragments mingled, ‘a myriad kind of mortal creatures were brought forth, endowed with all sorts of shapes, a wonder to behold. . . . Many were born with faces and breasts both front and back, oxen with the heads of men, and mixtures partly of men and partly of women’s nature, fitted with shadowed [sexual] parts.’ Over time, those creatures that were not constituted in a suitable way, such as the ‘man-headed oxen’, perished. Those whole-natured creatures, which were formed from parts that came together according to a logical formula and satisfied mutual needs, survived and began to reproduce themselves.

Aristotle put an end to this speculation about random evolution. For him, the fact that the parts of every animal fit together showed evidence of divine planning.


The view of an unchanging, hierarchical universe appeared to be consistent with a literal reading of the Bible and remained the dominant view for the next 2,000 years. By the eighteenth century, just prior to the age of revolution, nature was still represented as Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being. It was assumed that the Christian deity had created the world and all the species in it in their final form and at one time, in a grand hierarchy stretching from the lowest form of life ascending through numerous rungs until it reached humanity. Each species remained fixed and unchanging, and fit perfectly into its environment. Nature afforded the clearest proof of divine planning.

The ladder of nature originated at the top with God, the most perfect being, and worked its way down through categories of angels, humanity, the animals, and so on. The higher the rung on the ladder, the nearer the being was to perfection. Humanity came about midway on the scale. This model embraced in one conception both the natural and the spiritual orders, since both were viewed as elements within a continuum rather than as opposites. The eighteenth-century English poet, Alexander Pope, captured the idea memorably in *An Essay on Man*:

Vast chain of Being! which from God began,
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,
From thee to Nothing.

Following Aristotle’s principle of an immutable hierarchy in nature, the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné (known by the Latin name, Linnaeus, 1707–78) developed a system for

---

classifying living nature into classes, orders, genera, and species, giving each species a unique two-part Latin name. The first term in the scientific name represented the genus, the second the species. Humans became *Homo sapiens*, the term *sapien* implying wisdom and reflecting the Enlightenment principle that humanity’s main distinguishing feature was rationality. By giving humanity a genus, Linnaeus was not suggesting that humankind was not a unique creation. Humans were physically part of nature although their ability to reason made them distinct from the animal world and was connected to the supposition they possessed a soul. In 1735, Linnaeus classified humans in the order, ‘primates’ along with apes, monkeys, and bats. He was not implying a common, evolutionary origin, but merely combining species based on similarities he had defined. Linnaeus further subdivided the human species according to race into four varieties, a hierarchical classification he based on physical, cultural, and even moral criteria. Reflecting some of the ‘noble savage’ beliefs of Rousseau, Linnaeus placed American Natives at the top of the hierarchy, followed in order by Europeans, Asians, and Africans.4

For Linnaeus, each species was unique and occupied a particular space on the great ladder of beings created by God. He also accepted the common belief of the time that these species were newly created. Unlike Aristotle’s belief in an ancient universe, it was commonly believed that the earth was about 6,000 years old; perhaps through a literal interpretation of Biblical generations, Creation could be precisely dated to 4004 BC.

As Europeans conquered distant continents and explored what to them had been remote parts of the world, they encountered novel forms of life that began to undermine the concept of Aristotle’s static universe. One of the earliest opponents of the assumption of unchanging species was Walter Raleigh, an English pirate, adventurer, and explorer who found time between 1603 and 1616, while in the Tower of London waiting to be beheaded, to write several volumes of a history of the world. Unlike most scientists and philosophers of his day, he had travelled to distant lands, sailed around the globe, and founded a colony in what was then very much a new world. Raleigh’s life experiences taught him to doubt the received wisdom of an unchanging nature.

New and amazing species had to be fit somewhere into Linnaeus’ system of classification and into Biblical orthodoxy. As the number of species grew, the literal interpretation of the story of Noah’s Ark became increasingly implausible. Raleigh had wondered how large a ship it must have been to hold two members of each species on the earth. It was, in fact, inconceivable. Raleigh did not doubt the Biblical Flood, but he concluded that European species must have been carried to the New World where they underwent a gradual transformation of their shape caused by the new climate, eventually developing new species.5 Life forms, then, were not immutable; rather, they underwent structural modification over time.

For Linnaeus, the diversity of species may be greater than previously thought, but new species could still fit into his hierarchy of unchanging nature. Potentially more troublesome was the existence of fossilized bones and fossil imprints of species embedded into rock—species that appeared to have changed over time or even to have become extinct.

---


5 Wendt, In Search of Adam, 40–1.
Fossils or Via Plastica?

What we now consider fossilized remains from ancient life forms had been known for centuries. As Wendt points out, 6 thousands of frozen mammoth carcasses had been found in Siberia, and their tusks became the source of imported ivory. Fossils of sea creatures had been found in rock quarries thousands of miles from the sea, even on high mountain slopes. The dominant explanation of these phenomena was simply that these were freaks of nature. At the time of creation, a mysterious force—termed via plastica—had caused the shape of some rocks to imitate living creatures. They were nothing more than a practical joke of nature. Linnaeus, who accepted the via plastica theory, devoted only a single page of his *Systema Naturae* to fossils, classifying them as a form of ‘mineral’. 7 According to the novelist John Fowles, in 1857 the marine biologist, Gosse, made an even more ingenious suggestion. When God created Adam, Gosse said, he created at the same time all the fossils that appeared to be of extinct life forms. 8

Paradoxically, strict censorship laws coexisted in eighteenth-century France with the most radical thought. There were many critical books to be burned and liberal authors to be imprisoned or exiled. Undaunted, the nineteenth-century biologists and geologists continued their empirical inquiry into the origin of the universe, the earth, and life itself. France produced the first modern evolutionists. 9 In Paris, Count Buffon became Linnaeus’s chief antagonist. Buffon accepted Christian creation and the concept of the chain of being, but rather than constituting a series of distinct rungs on a ladder, he regarded the chain as a gradual continuum. More startling yet, he claimed that species had changed over time. 10

Linnaeus had classified human beings as a species, part of the order of primates, a designation they shared with the great apes. As orangutans and chimpanzees were brought from Asia and Africa into Europe and taught simple human-like skills, the distance between the highest animals and humanity appeared to be narrowed further. People speculated whether the great apes could learn to speak. The discovery of tribal societies with Stone Age technologies further narrowed the species gap and fuelled speculation about the existence of species intermediate between apes and humanity that perhaps had resulted from the mating of apes with ‘natives’. 11

Furthermore, the discovery of the actual nature of fossils appeared to demonstrate a large number of extinct species; the mammoth and an ancient type of rhinoceros, for example, had once lived in Europe and northern Asia. The fossil record also demonstrated that species had changed their form considerably over time. These two discoveries were incompatible with the traditional concept of the Chain of Being. Even Linnaeus, at the end of his life, struck out from his *Systema Naturae* the principle that forms of life are immutable—the cornerstone of the Great Chain of Being. By the end of the eighteenth century, some scientists were debating theories to explain how evolution occurred in nature.

---

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 18. This theory was proposed by the Arab scholar Ibn-Sina, known in Europe as Avicenna (980–1037), who, like Aristotle, believed that nature had no history.
8 John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (New York: Signet, 1970), 131n. Fowles comments that this ‘must surely rank as the most incomprehensible cover-up operation ever attributed to divinity’ (pp. 131n–132n).
10 Wendt, *In Search of Adam*, 82.
11 Ibid.
JEAN-BAPTISTE LAMARCK

The idea of slow, progressive development—evolution—was already a part of the intellectual landscape before Darwin. The eighteenth-century German poet, Goethe, challenged this view in his scientific explorations and implied in his poetry that life had evolved. His imagination ran ahead of scientific theory and the empirical observations that grounded explanation in observation. Even for scientists inclined to accept evolution, there were formidable obstacles. The incomplete fossil record had not yielded clear evidence of one species evolving into another species. This is still subject to serious scientific debate. It was not until the twentieth-century exploration of genetics and the principles underlying inheritance that evolution become the dominant perspective in biological sciences. There was no scientific understanding of how the first spark of life could have originated spontaneously in inert matter. In some contemporary scientific circles, it is held that the original spark of life on earth had an extraterrestrial, though materialistic, origin.

The French scientist Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) is remembered now more as the scientist who proposed an incorrect explanation for evolution. He ought to be remembered as one of the earliest and most prominent evolutionists, whose ideas proved more compatible with social than biological science. For Lamarck, fossils were evidence of the transformation of species over time. His views were in direct opposition to the assumption of the immutability of species, a position vigorously defended by the most prominent scientist of Lamarck’s day, Georges Cuvier (1769–1832).12

There appeared to be fossil evidence for different organisms existing at different times, but the central problem in evolution was the scarcity of evidence in the fossil record for actual evolutionary change itself. How did one organism gradually change into another? The main issue of contention was by what means evolution proceeds. How do organisms gradually change their form so that a species changes slowly over time and entirely new species arise? Lamarck believed that evolutionary change resulted from the effort an animal made to survive in its environment, gradually changing its body in the process.13 A giraffe stretched its neck slightly longer reaching for high leaves, thereby acquiring a slightly longer neck than the one with which it was born. It then passed on this acquired characteristic to its offspring, which was born with a slightly enlarged neck. In this way, over generations, the giraffe neck became elongated,14 as the eyes of the fish in Tolkien’s The Hobbit grew:

There are strange things living in the pools and lakes in the hearts of mountains: fish whose fathers swam in, goodness only knows how many years ago and never swam out again, while their eyes grew bigger and bigger and bigger from trying to see in the blackness.15

Lamarck, along with the rest of the scientific world of the nineteenth century, misunderstood the process of genetic inheritance. Lamarck’s view gradually became popular after his death. Comte argued that human

---

12 Ibid., 187–8.
14 Eiseley, Darwin’s Century, 49.
nature was not fixed forever; rather, it was modifiable within very narrow limits. In his view, continuous and uniform activity produced ‘an organic improvement which can gradually become fixed in the race, if it has persisted long enough’.

Lamarck’s theory combined a materialist explanation for evolution—the effects on a species of its use or disuse of its organs—and an idealist element, an underlying motive force that pushed evolution forward. That was the only possible way, Lamarck believed, to account for the progress that was evident in evolution. The fundamental idea that subsequent theorists were to draw from Lamarck was the notion that evolution was progressive, that species moved from lower to higher and that it was possible to understand this process as a series of progressively higher stages or types. According to this perspective, humans were more developed in their evolution than dolphins, Caucasians Europeans more advanced in evolution than Aborigines, and European culture more advanced than African.

In the absence of some underlying purpose, Lamarck asserted, evolution by chance would be as likely to lead to deterioration as progress. In the long run, when traditional thinkers gave up on the immutability of species, they would turn to Lamarck’s theory as being compatible with a form of creationism. The fact that each creature fit so well into its environment, they argued, was evidence of planning by a superior intelligence—a deity. Lamarck’s model of inheriting acquired characteristics fit the development of human societies, where purposive action could be linked to progressive change, better than the natural world for which he had initially intended it.

At first, however, the early ideas of evolution were attacked in their entirety. As in social theory generally after the French Revolution, there was also a conservative reaction against the idea of evolution.

THE CONSERVATIVE REACTION

The ideas of the French evolutionists fundamentally challenged traditional Christian beliefs. Just as the ideas of the Enlightenment were declared false and dangerous, the theory of evolution was deemed morally reprehensible. Lamarck was dismissed in England as a French atheist and his revolutionary ideas were shelved. One response among Christians was simply to declare the scientific evidence false and rely on a literal interpretation of the Bible. For most scientists who considered the problem, however, the existence of extinct species exposed in the ancient fossil beds had to be acknowledged and explained.

At first, the new discoveries were made to fit into the old explanation. Having abandoned the via plastica theory, traditional thinkers asserted that fossils were evidence of the Biblical Flood. When it was discovered that different fossils appeared to exist in different rock formations—simpler fossils in more ancient rock, more complex fossils in more recent rock strata—the evidence for slow, evolutionary change was strengthened. For traditional thinkers, however, the inconvenient scientific facts had to be shoehorned into the existing belief system. The succession of extinctions revealed in the fossil record meant to them that there had been multiple floods or other disasters, not just one Great Flood, and that successive catastrophes had

---

17 When novelist Salman Rushdie referred to ‘old Mr Lamarck’ in The Satanic Verses, he ignored this purposive element in Lamarck’s theory, stating it inappropriately in the passive voice: ‘under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired.’ (London: Viking 1988), 5.
18 Eiseley, Darwin’s Century, 54–5.
been followed by multiple creations.

Generally speaking, the first responses to the existence of facts that contradict a theory are never enough to refute the theory for those with a vested interest in believing it. As Thomas Kuhn has argued, the first response is to try to fit the new facts into the old theory. \(^{19}\) This was achieved by the doctrine known as catastrophism, which claimed the Flood of Noah’s time was simply the last in a series of catastrophes that had decimated all earlier existing forms of life on the earth after which, time after time, the deity had started life anew, with a new creation and new forms of life. As Wendt outlines the argument of the catastrophists, \(^{20}\) each layer of rock, from bottom to top, had been created at successively more recent times and each layer contained extinct forms of progressively more advanced life forms. After each catastrophe, God had created a new set of species, more fully developed than the previous, destroyed set. These successive destructions and creations had eventually led to humanity as the highest form.

This new interpretation was consistent with a Christian theology (although not one that assumed the earth had been created, literally, in six days). In the aftermath of the French Revolution and during the conservative reaction, catastrophism became ‘widely popular’. \(^{21}\) The chief theorist of catastrophism was Georges Cuvier. Twenty years before Lamarck’s death and just before the evolutionist’s total blindness, Cuvier put a premature end to Lamarck’s reputation and career. In a confrontation described by Wendt, \(^{22}\) Cuvier appeared unexpectedly in Lamarck’s lecture hall, hurled personal insults, and stalked off to his own lecture hall with Lamarck’s students trailing behind. Cuvier then proceeded to use his extensive knowledge of geological time and the fossil record to support his theory of catastrophes. Each fossil, Cuvier claimed, was a unique animal that was created as it was, died unchanged, and did not slowly develop into another form or species. \(^{23}\) Furthermore, there was clear evidence of mass extinctions in the fossil record—a fact recognized in modern science. Cuvier’s knowledge and charisma carried the day. Lamarck felt disgraced. He died penniless and in obscurity to be vindicated post mortem, at least in part, by a new generation of evolutionists.

Lamarck’s theory of evolution, however, was not unambiguously radical. Viewing evolution as the accumulation of changes, which were gradual and hardly perceptible in the short run, reflected the conservative view of the slow, historical development of social institutions. Similarly, while George Cuvier’s rejection of the principle of evolution was consistent with religious conservatism, his theory of catastrophism—that significant changes in natural history had happened relatively suddenly—reflected his own experience of social revolution in France. By the middle of the nineteenth century Charles Darwin had developed an evolutionary theory that, for a time, eventually put both the religious and scientific versions of catastrophism in the scientific dustbin and Lamarck on the bottom shelf. In 1858, Darwin and Charles Wallace independently published the theory of natural selection. By that time the public was somewhat better prepared to accept evolution, although not necessarily Darwin’s version of it. As Stromberg argued, \(^{24}\) Darwin contributed both the genius that fit all these pieces into one theory

---


\(^{20}\) Wendt, *In Search of Adam*.

\(^{21}\) Eiseley, *Darwin’s Century*, 69.

\(^{22}\) Wendt, *In Search of Adam*.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 188–92.

and, as well, spent a lifetime assembling scientific evidence to support his argument.

**DARWIN AND NATURAL SELECTION**

Over the course of his early scientific career, Darwin made careful observations of numerous species and their environment, particularly between 1831 and 1836, which he spent on a long, scientific sea voyage of discovery aboard the *Beagle*. As a result of his observations, he devised a new theory of evolution, but followed this with more than 20 years of further study and observation before he ventured to publish his discoveries in his *Origin of Species* (1859), one of the most influential books of the century.

Drawing his initial insight from Thomas Malthus’s theory of the survival of the fittest, Darwin recognized that each member of a species was different in some measure from all other members. Some of these traits were advantageous to the individual organism within its environment while others were disadvantageous. Beneficial traits allowed that member of the species a greater chance of surviving and passing on its advantage to its offspring. Each giraffe, for example, is somewhat different from every other. Like people who come in a variety of sizes, each giraffe differed from the others in height, some relatively tall, others relatively short. To use other examples, some cheetahs could run slightly faster than others; some members of a species of moth could blend into their environment more fully than other members, and so on.

In each case, certain individual members of a species were better adapted to their environment than others. Longer-necked giraffes could reach the leaves on the taller trees while short ones were more likely to feed poorly; faster cheetahs were able to catch more antelopes than slower ones; well-camouflaged moths avoided becoming dinner for some other species. Those members of the species that are better adapted will survive; the disadvantaged will have fewer offspring and their less advantageous traits will disappear in the species. Over time, the species will gradually change until it fits more and more perfectly into its environment. This is the process of natural selection. Adaptation, then, was not the result of an animal’s ‘efforts’ to meet environmental challenges, as Lamarck had proposed, but simply occurred naturally as animals struggled to survive in nature.

When the environment changes, new traits will be selected and the species will change slowly, or evolve, to be increasingly adapted to its new environment. If members of a species migrate to a new habitat such as an island with a distinct environment and are then isolated from breeding with members of the species left behind, then the two separate branches will evolve in different directions, gradually becoming increasingly unlike each other. Eventually they will become two separate species, unable any longer to mate successfully with their former relatives.

Like Lamarck, Darwin did not understand the mechanisms of genetic inheritance, of mutation and sudden leaps in evolution. Not until the twentieth century was the mechanism of genetic inheritance understood, as well as the process of mutation by which an individual member of a species could develop, by chance, a new inheritable trait. For Darwin, the principle of evolution was simple: nature did not make leaps.

The fossil record was also incomplete and had serious gaps, offering little evidence of the actual transformation of one species into another. Nevertheless, Darwin’s theory was gradually accepted in the English-speaking world as a cornerstone of evolution. While *On the Origin of Species* was immediately controversial, Darwin had only hinted at the place of humanity in this evolutionary scheme—Lamarck had been more direct in his claim that humankind had evolved from a higher ape. At the end of his book, Darwin suggested that, from his theory, ‘Light will be
thrown on the origin of man and his history.’ The publication of Darwin’s two later books, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), made the connection explicit: like any species, Darwin said, humanity had also evolved from earlier, simpler forms. Darwin rejected the notion that animals were driven by instincts while humans alone possessed a mind and were capable of higher mental functions. Darwin asserted that humans and animals had many behavioural characteristics in common and that animals were capable of actions that demonstrated considerable mental ability. 

Darwin had worked out his controversial theory about natural selection and human origins well in advance of publishing them, and ventured to make his view public only with large amounts of observational data as proof. His views about gender and race were less ‘heretical’. As a Victorian, Darwin subscribed to the view that men and women had different mental dispositions. Men were more energetic and possessed more inventive genius than women. They were more competitive and, hence, more ambitious and selfish. Women were tenderer and had greater powers of intuition and imitation. On the basis of his research, Darwin contended, biology determined that women were naturally suited for nurturing and care giving, but not for conflict or leadership. The tendency to draw distinctions between types within a species was contradicted by Darwin’s emphasis on variability within a species and the liberal view that human character was shaped, in many respects, by social circumstances and opportunity. Darwin was careful to support the equal education of women and was impressed by the quick ability of individuals from less developed cultures to learn the customs and culture of European society.

**Darwin and Victorianism**

The evolution of mankind – a growth of death-force.

-- Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* (1918)

During Victorian times science and Darwin were not alone in challenging Christian faith. Historical research into the history of the Middle East had cast doubt on the accuracy of the Old and New Testaments and the uniqueness of Christianity. For these new atheists, the term ‘gospel truth’ was an oxymoron. Darwinism challenged the beliefs of both Christians and secular humanists. Darwin implied that the rules of human morality were not Kantian absolutes; rather, they were human conventions—as represented by the Bloodhound Gang, although the novelist John Fowles makes the same point less brazenly in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (Box 11.2).

---

26 Ibid., 34–5.
27 Ibid., 35–6.
Box 11.2 The Rules of Morality are Merely Social Conventions

You and me baby ain’t nothing but mammals,
So let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.

Darwinism, as its shrewder opponents realized, let open the floodgates to something far more serious than the undermining of the Biblical account of the origins of man; its deepest implications lay in the direction of determinism and behaviourism, that is, towards philosophies that reduce morality to a hypocrisy and duty to a straw hut in a hurricane.

There were several responses to Darwin’s ‘attacks’. The Roman Catholic Church acted officially to list Darwinism and evolution as modern heresies and to reiterate the doctrine of papal infallibility. Darwin’s books were added to the list Catholics were forbidden to read, the Index librorum prohibitorum. Pope Pius IX (1846-78), who most forcefully proclaimed the doctrine of papal infallibility, denounced all forms of progress, liberalism, and modern civilization. Fundamentalists rejected the new evolutionary doctrines no less firmly than did the Roman Catholics by calling emotionally for a commitment to unquestioned faith. Faith in God, one’s personal salvation, and the imminence of the second coming of Jesus Christ were considered to be founded on intuitive knowledge. Less dogmatic theologians argued that evolution was simply part of the Divine Plan and was compatible with a deity who had set the world’s patterns of evolution in motion. This was the view that Darwin’s contemporary, Alfred Wallace, had promoted. In the ‘natural theology’ perspective, science and rationality were not contradictory to religion; rather, they were instruments for demonstrating the existence of God and understanding the principles under which the universe worked.

A variety of social attitudes emerged directly from the general pessimism many Victorians drew from Darwinism. If life was ruled by blind chance, fate, or contingency, the only realistic attitude to take was cynicism or pessimism. If there was no essential purpose to life, people were left to devise their own ends. Nothing stood in the way of the endless pursuit of egoistic pleasure and extreme experience, the answer of the Decadents. These developments were certainly unintended consequences of Darwin’s doctrines. Pessimism and decadence were given their most direct expression in the arts and in the lifestyle of a minority of turn-of-the-century intellectuals, a new generation of artists, writers, poets, and musicians. Their attitude was marked by the absence of an explicit social theory. Life did not need—in fact, it could not be given—an explanation. It just was. From the point of view of intellectual history, however, this

turned to narcotics and pre-marital sexual relations in the face of Darwin’s heretical belief that they were descended from chimpanzees (London: Viking, 1988, p. 77).

31 Stromberg, European Intellectual History, 123.
32 The Index, first created by Pope Pius IV in 1559, listed books that were deemed to be dangerous to Christian faith and morality.
33 Brace, ‘Race’ is a Four-Letter Word, 149.
in itself was a kind of theory.

**NATURALISM**

‘O! why were we given hungry hearts and wild desires if we have to live in a world like this?’
-- Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887: 237)

In literature, Darwinian pessimism influenced a literary genre known as naturalism. While the realists attempted to reveal the truths of the common person in a spirit of democratic egalitarianism, the naturalists usually focused their art on those who were more marginal or down and out. Naturalist fiction differed from realism in its subject as well as in its sense of the forces that underlie the real. Protagonists were not so much victims of society, but of fate, of degenerate human nature, or of other circumstances beyond their control or comprehension. Like the realists, the naturalist movement focused on real-life situations, though usually of the seamier kind. The realists had painted peasants in the fields or eating potatoes; they had portrayed workers trudging to or home from work.

The French writer, Émile Zola, wrote as though he were a scientist uncovering social problems among the underclass of prostitutes, criminals, and social outcasts. The naturalists removed the focus from individual morality. Bourgeois literature and drama had generally been concerned with the struggle between good and evil in people’s characters. How you acted in the world was a matter of choice, a test of your inner character and strength, of your virtue and morality. After Darwin, a different image of the human being emerged. Rather than being self-determined, people’s characters were shaped by the interplay of forces such as their heredity (the moral traits they had inherited biologically) and their environment. The person resembled a puppet pulled about, tragically or comically, by forces she or he did not understand and could not control.

**Box 11.3 Nature as Red in Tooth, Claw, and Bark**

[All she could see were more trees. . . . At their roots were stemless yellow fungi like lemons and apricots, and tall fungi with more stem than stool. Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbours that she had heard in the night. Beneath them were the rotting stumps of those of the group that had been vanquished long ago, rising from their mossy setting like black teeth from green gums….]

On older trees . . . huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling…. Sometimes a bough from an adjoining tree was swayed so low as to smite the roof in the manner of a gigantic hand smiting the mouth of an adversary, to be followed by a trickle of rain, as blood from the wound.

—Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887)
The English novelist, Thomas Hardy, represents this pessimistic outlook in his writing. It was difficult, thought Hardy, for artists to view nature in quite the same way after Darwinism. Nature had not changed; people’s perspective on nature had changed. Birds sang to define and defend their territory; trees struggled for life against odds that threatened to snuff them out; vines grew and strangled the saplings they embraced (Box 11.3). Nature ‘knew neither law nor sin’. It was ‘red in tooth and claw’, as the poet Alfred Tennyson had claimed in his poem ‘In Memoriam’, nine years before Darwin’s Origin. Tennyson named the literary style that celebrated the ‘glowing gloom’ of chaos ‘Zolaism’ (for the French writer, Émile Zola).

Hardy’s universe was completely indifferent to human endeavours and their aspirations to live a moral life. It was a cruel, heartless world, and only people with no higher moral inclinations or refined feelings were suited to it. By no means did survival of the fittest imply that the best succeeded. In contrast, those who strove the hardest to achieve ethical ends faced disappointment and disillusionment. Given the actual state of nature, ruthless and immoral people were the most adapted to their natural and social environments and were the most likely to be successful within them. In this sense, Hardy’s Naturalism contradicted the social Darwinist assumption that the successful were equal to the ‘best’.

Writing in the age of positivism and Darwin, Hardy wrote about characters who were not fully responsible for the outcomes of their actions. Their efforts to direct events in their lives were largely doomed to failure: ‘Bur see how powerless is the human will against predestination!’ The human ability to reason paled into insignificance alongside the powers of genetic inheritance, environmental determinism, fate, and nature. There was no romantic soul-mate. In the right circumstances, you could fall in love with anyone. Human love, Hardy says, was an entirely subjective thing:

‘it is joy accompanied by an idea which we project against any suitable object in the line of our vision, just as the rainbow iris is projected against an oak, ash, or elm tree indifferently. So that if any other young lady had appeared instead of the one who did appear, I should have felt just the same interest in her, and have quoted precisely the same lines from Shelley about her, as about this one I saw. Such miserable creatures of circumstances are we all!’

If, for Hardy, there was a supreme being or a ‘President of the Immortals’, as he put it in his novel, Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891), this deity was a malevolent rather than a benevolent force. The combined forces of nature, society, and fate confound human intention at every turn. The would-be hero is inevitably doomed.

A convention of popular Romantic fiction coincides chance with good fortune. In Hardy’s naturalism, however, coincidence works to thwart rather than to promote human happiness. In Tess of the D’Urbervilles, a tragic chain of circumstances is unleashed when Tess’s letter of confession to Angel Clare never reaches her but is accidentally hidden under the doormat.

35 Hardy, The Woodlanders, 369.
36 Hardy, The Woodlanders, 227.
37 Hardy, The Woodlanders, 138.
38 It is also a conventional Hollywood plot device.
It was not only the fates, but also social conventions that conspired to destroy Tess. By Victorian standards, Tess was an immoral woman. An early victim of seduction, Tess became a mistress and a criminal. In one sense, her eventual death by hanging represented what Victorian England would have expected as the suitable outcome of such a life. Nevertheless, Hardy’s characterization scandalized Victorian propriety. He presented Tess as a victim, as an essentially ‘good’ woman. Wrong had been done to her by the very conventions of the Victorian society that had determined her fate and then destroyed her.

In the United States, the controversial Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945) exemplified the conscious use of naturalism in fiction. Like Hardy, his heroes, too, challenged the double moral standards of the times. As Pizer argues, realist literature was defended in late nineteenth-century America as being democratic and egalitarian in spirit, as focusing attention on the common person rather than on the aristocratic rich. Realism depicted life as it more generally was, with the warts clearly visible, rather than through the lens of Romantic illusion or wishful thinking. Realism evolved into naturalism in American literature as authors focused on the socially marginal or morally suspect individual, who struggles in an environment of uncontrollable social forces, always subject to the vicissitudes of random chance and fate.

Box 11.4 Human Life Not More Important than the Life of Rats

I discovered that all that I had deemed substantial—man’s . . . very identity save as an infinitesimal speck of energy . . . drawn or blown here and there by larger forces in which he moved quite unconsciously as an atom—was questioned and dissolved. . . . Up to this time there had been in me a blazing and unchecked desire to get on and the feeling that in doing so we did get somewhere. Now in its place was the definite conviction that spiritually one got nowhere . . . that one lived and had his being because one had to, and that it was of no import, no more so than that of any bug or rat. Of his ideals, his struggles, deprivations, sorrows as well as joys, it could only be said that they were chemic compulsions—something which for some inexplicable but unimportant reason responded to and resulted from the hope of pleasure and the fear of pain. Man was a mechanism, undevised and uncreated—and a badly and carelessly driven one at that. He was governed by creature desire. . . .

—Theodore Dreiser, *Newspaper Days* (1922)

Dreiser had experienced the hardship of poverty and was largely self-educated. At a time when journalists were engaged in harsh social criticism of the new American elite (the ‘robber barons’) and the hardships and oppression facing working people, Dreiser found work as a newspaper reporter, an occupation that allowed him to develop his writing craft and also brought him into contact with the poverty and social dislocation of the seamier side of turn-of-the-century America. His understanding of these social conditions was influenced by his reading of French authors such as Émile Zola and the social Darwinists. Dreiser wrote that reading Herbert Spencer’s *Synthetic Philosophy* ‘quite blew me to bits intellectually.’

Life was a struggle for survival in a new, urban jungle, where human behaviour was dictated by chemical substances in

the blood and where the overwhelming tide of human affairs determined people’s fate (Box 11.4).\(^{41}\)

As would be the case for many intellectuals in the early decades of the twentieth century, Dreiser’s hopes for social reform took him into the socialist camp. He travelled to Spain in the 1930s, along with many progressives, to oppose the Fascist revolt led by Francisco Franco against the elected, reformist government. Late in his life, Dreiser joined the Communist Party.

Dreiser’s novel *An American Tragedy* (1925) was about a poor man, Clyde Griffiths, who was driven by his desire to achieve success at any cost. Griffiths’s fate is sealed after he plans to murder his lover by taking her out on a lake with the intent to disguise her drowning as an accident. Although he changes his mind, his lover dies anyway in a freak accident—demonstrating that one’s fate is outside one’s control and life often seems to be driven by a malevolent natural force that thwarts human plans. In legal terms, Griffiths had formed a criminal intent and then put his victim into a dangerous situation. He was tried, condemned, and executed, however, for intentional murder. But Dreiser is not concerned with the potential miscarriage of justice that had occurred. The fundamental injustice he expounds is deeper and less personal than an unfair trial. The novel argues that Griffiths’s guilt was not solely his responsibility; equally at fault was an amoral society that incites unrealizable desires, pushes people into rash actions, and then blames them when they are unable to meet these impossible goals.

Dreiser’s criticism of American capitalism is most biting in his novel, *The Financier*, a story about a rapacious ‘robber baron’. In this novel, Dreiser reflected both the ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality of Spencer and, as well, Nietzsche’s concept of the ‘superhuman’ (see below). In Dreiser’s view, the problems of American capitalism were caused both by the economic system that promoted fierce competition for the rewards of material success, and by human nature itself, which had not yet evolved sufficiently far from the instinctual beast within humanity. These basic, instinctual desires, when combined with the capitalist culture and ethic of endless competition and consumption, proved a deadly combination. Even achieving success in the American sense did not bring happiness or contentment; in fact, it was incapable of doing so. Ultimately, both the culture of America and the nature of humanity would have to change for social reforms to be truly effective.

In his first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), Dreiser told the story of an ordinary young woman, Carrie Meeber, described as ‘a fair example of the middle American class—two generations removed from the emigrant’. Self-interest was her guiding characteristic and ‘she was . . . ambitious to gain in material things.’\(^{42}\) As the subtitle of Chapter One asserts, Carrie was ‘a waif amid forces’ she did not comprehend. Like ‘The Magnet Attracting’, she was moved ‘by forces wholly superhuman’, becoming one of the numberless crowd of migrants pouring from rural to urban America, a mere ‘wisp on the tide’.\(^{43}\) For Dreiser, as the Darwinists had theorized, humans were dominated by instincts and ‘creature desires’ more than by reason and free will.

Chasing the American Dream, Carrie was drawn to Chicago, which was rapidly being transformed from a quiet railway junction to a metropolis of extremes. Carrie quickly came to perceive ‘how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart.’\(^{44}\) What she found, however, was the dull routine

---

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 610–11.


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 23.
of working-class subsistence as a proletarian machine operative in a shoe factory. Initially forced to board with relatives, she found them tied to an endless round of drudgery and deprivation, the ‘grimness of shift and toil’.  

Carrie’s mind was elsewhere; her feelings, especially her desires, ran deeply: ‘She longed and longed and longed.’

When Carrie found the means to achieve the material trappings of success, she succeeded not by dint of hard work—the path to upward mobility for women was greatly restricted—but by becoming the mistress of a travelling salesman. Eventually Carrie was able to find prosperity in a slightly more respectable career in the theatre. Dreiser’s novel scandalized his audience. *Sister Carrie*—the character as well as the novel as a whole—was deemed amoral because Dreiser was transgressing a socially accepted moral code. Proper values were supposed to lead to success, while those who followed the easy, immoral path inevitably came to bad ends. Carrie’s apparent success demonstrated the opposite moral lesson, as had Moll Flanders’s picaresque career in Defoe’s novel a couple of centuries earlier. Dreiser’s naturalism did not knuckle under the moralistic prescriptions of late Victorianism.

*Sister Carrie* also dealt more overtly with sexuality than was considered proper; although more was implied than described, the reader was left in no doubt about what had transpired. The novel had a stormy history of publication, partly also because of its use of profanities, an important mark of realism in fiction. Many of Dreiser’s other works suffered similar problems. Some sexually explicit passages in *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) and *The ‘Genius’* (1915) were edited before publication. Even so, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice threatened to bring criminal charges for obscenity against the publisher unless the obscenity and blasphemy were expurgated.

The principal ‘desire’ in Dreiser’s novels (and in his personal life) was for sexuality, a literary theme that encountered a social minefield in early twentieth-century America. In his reply to the critics who complained that immoral literature undermined people’s virtue, Dreiser accused them of hiding their real motivation: ‘The influence of intellectual ignorance and physical and moral greed upon personal virtue produces the chief tragedies of the age, and yet the objection to the discussion of the sex question is so great as to almost prevent the handling of the theme entirely.’

In England, where *Sister Carrie* had a more receptive audience, the taboo about describing sexuality in literature was about to be demolished by D.H. Lawrence, although for many decades Lawrence’s work would be published in the United States only in expurgated editions.

In their experimentation with more sexually explicit material, many early twentieth-century novelists sought to replicate the artistic freedom that visual artists who had painted nude women and men had so long enjoyed, although they had done so in relatively immobile contexts, similar to still lifes. The graphic depiction of copulation, for example, was generally eschewed except in the underground market for pornography, which proliferated in Victorian times. The overt display of sexuality as a normal part of the visual cultural is one of the most obvious differences between the late nineteenth century and the contemporary West. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the boundary between the pornographic under-culture and the more elite artistic exploration of sexuality was being breached. In Vienna, Victorian reticence about public

---

45 Ibid., 11.
46 Ibid., 108.
discourse on sexuality was being eroded under Sigmund Freud’s guidance, as middle class women were revealing their sexual abuse and their desires on the physician’s ‘couch’. The attempt to create a new science of ‘sexology’ stimulated a widespread public discussion of forms of sexuality. As it passed through the psychoanalytic movement initiated by Freud and modern psychological literature, human sexuality became a dominant theme in Western culture. For moralists, the apparent decline in sexual ethics was proof of the decadent consequences of Darwinism.

HERBERT SPENCER

The application of Darwinian principles to social theory was called social Darwinism. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ideas of laissez-faire capitalism were being eclipsed by those who recognized the need for government-sponsored reforms. Liberalism was put on the road to social liberalism by theorists such as Bentham, Taylor, and Nightengale (see Chapter Seven). Darwin, however, vindicated the older, dog-eat-dog vision of social life, the vision of Malthus and, before him, of Hobbes.

Hegel and the conservatives had already applied the principle of evolution to human history. For Hegel, however, it had still been necessary to hypothesize a supernatural Spirit who wrote and directed the script of human progress. Now a theory of history could be devised based on natural laws such as natural selection and the impact of an advanced culture on a backward one. The daunting task of applying the principle of natural evolution to all of human history was addressed by the English sociologist, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903).

Spencer grew to maturity in the early years of triumphant British industrial capitalism, when laissez-faire ideas dominated politics and economics and the British government was busy deregulating the economy. By mid-century, British capitalism was about as free of government interference as it would get and the tide was already turning towards a more socially conscious type of liberal social theory and politics. By that time, Spencer’s ideas had been set and he maintained a single-minded defence of economic individualism until his death, long after capitalism had moved from being relatively small-scale and competitive to become large-scale oligopolies. Spencer found himself increasingly out of step with modern society.

Although his father was a schoolmaster, Spencer’s formal schooling lasted for only three months. Like Mill, he was home-schooled, being taught science and mathematics by his father and uncle, and became thoroughly agnostic. Joseph Priestley’s social ideas were especially influential on young Spencer, MacRea argues. From Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, Spencer drew a deep antipathy towards all forms of government interference in the liberties of the individual. Like Malthus, Priestley decried any government assistance for the needy or the poor, for victims of disaster or disease. Allow nature to take its course, he recommended, because government always makes things worse. This was as close to any statement of faith that Spencer would wholeheartedly embrace.

Like Darwin and Wallace, Spencer derived the idea of the survival of the fittest from Malthus. Society was inherently competitive, he believed, and from this competition came human progress. The laissez-faire doctrines of free trade, free enterprise, and free competition were the social equivalent of Darwin’s natural selection. Since these were the motors of progress, it followed that the proper course for human development was to allow these laws of competition

---

to operate without interference; to do otherwise would only cause harm to society.

For Spencer, the most dangerous shark in the economic environment was the threat of government regulation and the expansion of the power of the state over the individual. For the social liberals, the greatest threat to the well-being of the nation came from the harmful consequences of laissez-faire and the shark-like, rapacious businessmen who became rich on the exposed backs of the labouring poor. Far-sighted liberals perceived the warning of a greater danger on the horizon. Unless workers’ grievances were satisfied, they might rise in revolution. Spencer argued that this discontent was the consequence of providing elementary schooling for the working class, another social liberal reform. Educating workers had resulted in increasing their expectations for things that were impossible. They had been fed ‘pleasant illusions’ that produced only discontent.50 The real interest of the business class was to protect laissez-faire, not to reform the system.

Government Regulation

Spencer was an absolute opponent of the modern, interventionist state. In ‘The new Toryism’, Spencer complained, ‘Most of those who now pass as [Social] Liberals, are Tories of a new type.’51 For the last couple of decades, Spencer wrote in 1884, Liberals had changed their tune. In the early years, the movement from freedom to restriction had been easy. Individuals had looked to government to satisfy their grievances and this was appropriate because the source of the grievance was usually government restriction itself. Under the old-fashioned conservatives (or Tories), the state had exercised a great deal of coercive power over the freedom of individuals. Repealing these restrictive laws removed the obstacles to individual freedom. The Liberals, Spencer said, had increasingly reduced the power of the state and expanded the liberty of individuals in the decades after Napoleon’s defeat in 1815. When the East India Company had a legal monopoly of trade with India, the law blocked other businessmen from entering the trade, restricting their freedom. When the government dissolved the monopoly, anyone with sufficient capital could accumulate additional money by trading in the now open Indian economy.

What if the source of the grievance, however, was not in restrictive laws but resulted from the action of individuals themselves? Working people were angered by the long hours and unsafe working conditions they had to endure, by the employment of children in unhealthy occupations, by the adulteration of their food, by the deplorable state of their substandard housing, by the absence of medical attention they could afford—an apparently endless litany of injustices and exploitation. Again, they looked to government to remedy their hardships. But this situation was now entirely different from the past, Spencer argued, and government reform produced harmful consequences for the whole economy.

When the population demanded reforms from government, which necessarily meant adding more restrictions on the freedom of business owners, fundamental weaknesses of the democratic system in an era of universal franchise were exposed. Politicians of whatever party had to pander to the demands of the population in order to win re-election. That meant making promises and then delivering them. Since at least 1860, Spencer complained, Malthus’s principle of population growth had been extrapolated to legislation: the government had been exponentially increasing the amount of new legislation restricting the freedom of individuals in the conduct of their businesses. New government rules imposed standards on the conditions of

factory work, the production and serving of food and drink, the hours of work, rental housing, the education of children, and so on. To make his point, Spencer lists pages of examples of legal restrictions that, as he deemed a final irony, the rich had to pay for out of their taxes.\(^5^2\)

What these Christians and social liberals did not realize, Spencer argued, was the ultimate harm caused by their interference. They were caught up in a short-term perspective, relieving this suffering here and that hardship there, while losing sight of the bigger picture. There was much more at stake than mere reforms, however pernicious they were alone. The socialists were pushing the process along, attacking the exploiters on behalf of those they called wage-slaves and intending to bring fundamental social change. The real question, then, was where all these reforms were leading, what kind of social structure was being created in the absence of any foresight by Parliament.\(^5^3\) Spencer complained that, step by step, government reforms were building big, bureaucratic government: ‘The numerous socialistic changes made by Act of Parliament’, in addition to others yet to be made, ‘will by-and-by all be merged in State-socialism’:

The belief, not only of the socialists but also of those so-called Liberals who are diligently preparing the way for them, is that by due skill an ill-working humanity may be framed into well-working institutions. It is a delusion. The defective nature of citizens will show themselves in the bad acting of whatever social structure they are arranged into. There is no political alchemy by which you can get golden conduct out of leaden instincts.\(^5^4\)

The future would bring an era of a new form of slavery. For Spencer, a slave was defined as someone who ‘labours under coercion to satisfy another’s desire.’ Slavery is more severe the greater the ‘extent to which effort is compulsorily expended for the benefit of another instead of for self-benefit’. It doesn’t matter whether the benefit from the labour is received by a slave owner, a private company, or the community as a whole because it is taken from the individual. Under socialism, what one produces is taken by the state and, in return, he or she receives from the ‘general store’ of goods what the state awards. It is still a form of slavery, Spencer believed, and worse than the kind the socialists said existed under capitalism.\(^5^5\) By Spencer’s definition, even the self-employed were becoming slaves. Government taxation, which takes away part of what someone earns for the benefit of others, is a modern form of slavery. Hence, right-wing theorists in our day who still endorse Spencer’s laissez-faire ideology proclaim what they call ‘tax freedom day’, dividing an individual’s annual income into the part that is taxed (the measure of Spencer’s definition of slavery) and the part that the individual can spend personally. This approach presumes that taxes are not expended socially to benefit all taxpayers directly or to bring numerous indirect benefits to the wealthiest by sustaining a social system in which vast inequalities are justified and protected.

Spencer did not see the movement towards state capitalism as part of the inevitable evolution of industrialism, as Marxists suggested, or as a necessary element in the development of positivism in Comte’s evolutionary theory. For Spencer, big government was contrary to the direction natural evolution would have taken society. The coming of modern state socialism was

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 71–7.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 110.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 100–1.
the result of choices made by politicians, journalists, trade union leaders, and other decision-makers who did not accept the truth, as Spencer put it, that ‘miseries are caused by the ill-working of human nature’ and therefore are not curable.56

Even if state socialism was intended to work for the mutual benefit of all, Spencer continued, by his definition it would still be a mild form of slavery. More importantly, however, it could never be mild. ‘The machinery of Communism . . . has to be framed out of existing human nature; and the defects of existing human nature will generate . . . the same evils’. Humanity’s love of power, selfishness, injustice, and untruthfulness will inevitably doom any attempt at social reform. Inevitably the leaders of such a society will take whatever measures are necessary to maintain their own supremacy, creating a great tyranny ‘under which the mass of the people, controlled by grades of officials, and leading lives that were inspected out-of-doors and in-doors, laboured for the support of the organization which regulated them, and were left with but a bare subsistence for themselves.’ Human nature will guarantee this outcome.57

The alternative to the slow rise of authoritarianism in liberal democracy or to its fullest expression in modern socialism was to allow the maximum of economic freedom to all persons. Laissez-faire works to the advantage of the great majority. Spencer asks, what causes the existence of overcrowded, slum housing? The fault lies at the doorstep of the legislature, not in the corporate boardroom. Government taxes on bricks and wood make it too expensive to build decent houses for the poor. More importantly, the evil of slum housing is caused by government regulation of rents. When government attempts to make rent affordable, the inevitable result is fewer and worse houses for the poor. Fixed rents allow landlords who own substandard houses to make a reasonable living, perpetuating slum housing; but the rents are not high enough to induce people with money to build slightly better housing, because the rent would be too low for profit-taking. Consequently, only houses for the better off were constructed, while the poor were crowded into the substandard houses that the landlord cannot afford to repair without also raising the rent.58

A suitable house for the poor could be constructed; but that would occur only with the deregulation of rents. Spencer realized that rent for better housing would have to be higher, but, he contended, it wasn’t that the poor could not afford higher rents; they merely wasted their pay on unnecessary consumption. In short, since all benefits that the poor think they receive from the government actually come from taxing the rich, Spencer complains, if the rich were allowed to use the capital for their private businesses that is otherwise lost to taxes, benefits for all would result.

Social Darwinism

The doctrine of evolution would seem to be incompatible with a belief in a fixed human nature. Spencer admitted that human beings are modifiable to a degree through the use or disuse of their faculties, and that such adaptive changes are inheritable. Over time, ‘constitution fits itself to conditions’. Under new conditions, such as in the Americas, ‘new national characters are even now being moulded’. Similarly, every law that serves to modify human action will eventually

56 Ibid., 106.
57 Ibid., 108–10.
58 Herbert Spencer, ‘The sins of legislators’, in MacRea, ed., Herbert Spencer, 120. Spencer quotes from his 1850 book, Social Statics, where he had originally made this argument.
cause ‘fresh adjustments of their nature’, a ‘re-moulding of the average character’.\textsuperscript{59} In Spencer’s sociology, human history was driven by cultural evolution as new characteristics were developed and passed on to future generations—an adaptation of Lamarck’s theory of evolution. The culture of society would evolve progressively, then, in the absence of conscious meddling by the state.

Social activities ‘are the aggregate results of the desires of individuals who are severally seeking satisfactions, and ordinarily pursuing the ways which, with their pre-existing habits and thoughts, seem the easiest.’ From this it follows that social development was generated, for the most part, ‘by men’s efforts to achieve their private ends.’ All technological innovation, the catalyst of progress, has resulted from individuals pursuing their individual purposes; nothing has been achieved by state intervention other than the preservation of order, which is the sole legitimate purpose of government.\textsuperscript{60}

In nature, every organism requires special protection and care while young. Failing to provide for the next generation would doom the species. Once mature, however, the reverse proposition applies. At that point, individuals are either well-endowed or poorly endowed, ‘each adult gets benefit in proportion to merit—reward in proportion to desert’; that is, all the necessities to sustain life. In competition with members of its own and antagonistic species, the individual either ‘thrives and propagates’ or ‘dwindles and gets killed off’. Nature provides for multiplication of the superior. If the reverse occurred, the multiplication of the inferior, ‘progressive degradation would result’ for the species as a whole, which would not hold its place in the struggle for existence. This idea was clearly expressed by Darwin (Box 11.5).\textsuperscript{61} Similarly, a society that stands in competition with other societies can only hold its own if it propagates superior, well-endowed individuals. To do otherwise can end only in disaster. Society must be arranged so that rewards are commensurate with the demand for an individual’s particular labour.\textsuperscript{62} Spencer was worried that society was slowly declining because the poor and the least fit had more children than the rich, who were supposedly the fittest. Over time, then, the population would deteriorate as undesirable people proliferated. In the bleak Malthusian tone, Spencer declared that poverty, starvation, and misery were, in fact, ‘far-seeing benevolence’.\textsuperscript{63} This survival-of-the-fittest doctrine is the core of social Darwinism as an ideology.

\textbf{Box 11.5 Darwin: The Descent of Man}

With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of everyone to the last moment. . . . Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Spencer, ‘Sins of legislators’, 133–5.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Charles Darwin, \textit{The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex} (New York: Appleton, 1898 [1871]), 136.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Spencer, ‘Sins of legislators’, 136–8.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Herbert Spencer, quoting from \textit{Social Statics} (1851), ibid., 138–9.
\end{itemize}
care . . . leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed.
—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871)

Spencer had staked these claims in his *Social Statics*, published in 1851. Three decades later he declared, ‘The beneficial results of the survival of the fittest, prove to be immeasurably greater than’ those he had anticipated, a truth that ‘is recognized by most cultivated people’. Yet, Spencer bemoaned, ‘now more than ever before in the history of the world, [legislators] are . . . doing all they can to further survival of the unfittest!’

Spencer’s fundamental assumption was that those who are suffering under present arrangements deserve their fate. Sympathy is misplaced when people do not let nature take its course. The unworthy deserve their sufferings, which would come automatically through the struggle for existence. To whom should sympathy be extended? Spencer’s answer is: those who are well off. Social reformers make life ‘harder for the worthy and inflict on them and their children artificial evils in addition to the natural evils they have to bear!’

While most money comes from the ‘relatively well-off’, the ‘virtuous poor’ are also made to pay, Spencer claims, to support the ‘vicious poor’:

[T]he well-being of existing humanity . . . [is] secured by that same beneficent, though severe discipline, to which . . . creation at large is subject: a discipline which is pitiless in the working out of good . . . which never swerves for the avoidance of partial and temporary suffering. The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shouldering aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many ‘in shallows and in miseries’, are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence.

The process must be undergone and the sufferings must be endured. No power on earth . . . can diminish them one jot.

**Evolutionary Sociology**

The social liberals and socialists regarded society as a ‘plastic mass’, as dough they could shape according to their will. Like the conservatives, Spencer assumed an organic conception of society that he termed scientific—society was like an organism, a living body, with a natural structure having numerous parts all interdependent, each of which had specific functions to perform for the good of the whole.

Spencer contrasted ‘artificial’ with natural development. The supernatural creation and control of life and society, as well as the practice of government interference in social life, were ‘artificial’. Society, as life itself, had evolved naturally ‘by changes as insensible as those through which a seed passes into a tree’, reaching its present complexity ‘slowly and silently’. Society is not the creation of great individuals but has grown naturally to its present form, whatever that may be, and the government of any nation conforms to the average character of its

---

64 Spencer, ‘Sins of legislators’, 141.
65 Ibid., 144. ‘[I]s it not cruel to increase the sufferings of the better that the sufferings of the worse may be decreased?’ (p. 146).
66 Ibid., 146.
67 Ibid., 147.
members. A government or powerful individual, such as Cromwell or Napoleon, may artificially attempt to change the arrangements under which people live, but such change is always temporary and sooner or later previous conditions will be restored.\textsuperscript{68} Permanent change must be developed slowly; no permanent change results suddenly from without.

Spencer saw society as resembling a living organism in that both size and complexity increase over time and generate a structure of parts that are functionally interdependent. Both exist as a whole, although there is constant replacement of those parts that do not affect the totality. Furthermore, both societies and species of life exist in a variety of forms, a variation explained by the surrounding conditions within which each evolved.\textsuperscript{69} Finally, in more complex organisms and in society, ‘feeling is monopolized by one class of the vital elements.’ In an organism, only a special tissue experiences feeling. In society, while ‘all the members are endowed with feeling’ and ‘the units of a community are all sensitive, they are so in unequal degrees. The classes engaged in laborious occupations are less susceptible, intellectually and emotionally, than the rest; and especially less so than the classes of highest mental culture.’

Spencer seeks analogies between the structure of organisms and the structure of various degrees of societies, from the simplest ‘Bushmen’ to more complex societies, which progressively develop divisions of labour among their members, as more complex organisms develop functionally different parts. In organisms and in societies, development proceeds ‘from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous’ and ‘from the indefinite to the definite’.\textsuperscript{70} The circulation of the blood in a body is parallel to the circulation of commodities in society, providing the middle or merchant class with the vital task of sustaining social life.

Eventually, through the natural processes of cultural evolution, a class distinction emerges between a regulatory and co-ordinating minority and a large class of producers, the two classes growing increasingly apart in function. The former class originates in struggle among individuals, through which in primitive societies ‘the strongest, most courageous, most sagacious, become rulers and leaders’, finally producing a dominant class. As society develops, effective rule demands intelligence more than brute strength and government develops parallel to the nervous system of an organism.\textsuperscript{71}

The weakness of a kingship model is that it is likely to be swayed by personal or class interests. So long as the nature of humanity is savage or anti-social, despotic rule—Hobbes’s Leviathan—is necessary. Only a ‘strong, determined, cruel ruler . . . can repress their explosive natures and keep them from mutual destruction.’ The result is the kind of society Spencer calls ‘military’, which is dominated by a centralized warrior class and directs its energies at defensive and offensive warfare. Over time, however, the old predatory instinct dwindles from lack of use as the changing conditions of social life modify the character of individuals and sympathetic feelings grow. The authority of the ruler diminishes.\textsuperscript{72}

In more complex societies, a third, ‘trading or middle class’ emerges. Society evolves from the military type to the industrial type. Societies that progress further evolve a representative body (Parliament) analogous to the brain that averages ‘the interests of the various classes in the community’. A good Parliament, for Spencer, is one in which the interests represented are so sufficiently balanced that legislation allows to any one class only what is

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 205.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 214–15.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{72} Herbert Spencer, ‘Representative government—What is it good for?’, in MacRea, ed., \textit{Herbert Spencer}, 261.
consistent with the claims of the other classes. \(^{73}\) Democracy, Spencer argued in 1857, was ‘the best form of government’ provided it does not extend beyond its comparatively limited function of maintaining order and protecting the nation from external enemies. Even less intelligent people could understand these limited functions, which did not extend to interfering in the operation of economic laws. \(^{74}\)

While Spencer approved of Parliament in principle, he had objections to representative government. Many electors do not have the will to elect proper representatives. Shopkeepers vote according to their most prominent patron; in a larger class of voters, small sums of money or the liberal supply of beer is all it takes to secure a vote. Besides a lack of will, most electors lack ability. Higher-class voters are too often characterized by gross political ignorance while, among the larger, lower class, there exists ‘an almost hopeless stupidity’. Spencer quotes from Thomas Carlyle, who defined the people as ‘twenty-seven million, mostly fools’. Elected members are really representative of the people who elect them in one sense only, Spencer claimed: ‘of the average stupidity’. \(^{75}\) These representatives then legislate in every aspect of the life of society when they are unequal to understand any part of it. What they lack, in particular, is knowledge of the natural laws of society, a gap his sociology was meant to fill. \(^{76}\)

The analogy between living organisms and society was not perfect. The essential difference was that, in an organism, the welfare of any part was subservient to the welfare of the whole, which had a single, corporate consciousness. A pain experienced by any part of the organic body is felt by the entire being. The body of society, however, is made of independent living units each with its own consciousness and with individual feelings of pleasure or pain. From this it follows that the welfare of individual citizens cannot be sacrificed to the welfare of the society. \(^{77}\)

**SOCIAL DARWINISM IN AMERICA**

The type of sociology that found favour in North America was profoundly affected by the developments in sociological thought in Europe. There were two competing influences on American sociology, one derived from the positivists, Saint-Simon and Comte, and influenced a reformist strain in American social science; the second derived from Herbert Spencer. Both influences rejected the eighteenth-century assumption that society rested on a social contract. Rather, like the conservatives, Comte had focused on the development of a science of society that would emphasize the social structure and its effects on the individuals within it. For the positivists, while a society was obviously made up of individuals, the social structure was more powerful than the individuals who composed it: the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

More significant than Comte’s positivism for the very beginnings of American academic sociology were the ideas of Spencer, whose popularity in US universities extended into the twentieth century. In America, social Darwinism was popularized by William Sumner. Sumner’s social Darwinism was based on the application of the biological principle of natural selection to society, the correlative of which was that individual intervention (‘meddling’) would most likely result in negative consequences. It was better to allow social processes to proceed unhindered.

\(^{73}\) Spencer, ‘Social organization’, 229.
\(^{74}\) Spencer, ‘Representative government’, 265–8.
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 242–3, 249.
\(^{76}\) Ibid., 249–51.
\(^{77}\) Spencer, ‘Social organization’, 204–5.
Intervention, Sumner argued, could deflect society from the natural and best evolutionary path. People had an unfortunate habit of attempting to help the down-and-out through individual charity or government reform. Like Malthus, Sumner believed that such reforms made conditions worse in the long run, not better. Sumner’s only hope, which he regarded as faint, was that people might be convinced through the educational system to allow the natural laws of social evolution to work out freely without intervention, a policy he was convinced would produce the best results for society as a whole. This new application of the old laissez-faire doctrine had the consequence of preserving the existing forms of the social structure—the status quo—and thereby primarily benefiting the dominant classes. Edward Youmans, another American sociologist and an early advocate of social Darwinism, argued that:

> the spirit of civilization . . . is pacific, constructive, controlled by reason, and slowly ameliorating and progressive. Coercive and violent measures which aim at great and sudden advantages are sure to prove illusory. . . . [Science shows] that we are born well or born badly and that whoever is ushered into existence at the bottom of the scale can never rise to the top because the weight of the universe is upon him.  

78

In short, social evolution will naturally and slowly move in the direction of making society better—more peaceful, harmonious, and prosperous. Problems will eventually solve themselves. So leave things alone and don’t try to intervene with social reforms. This organic conception of society was highly conservative because it implied that social classes—capital and labour—existed in a natural state of harmony. Consequently, class conflict could result only from incorrect perceptions that failed to recognize this harmony. Labour should co-operate with capital and be satisfied with its place, performing its function within the social whole.

For Spencer, conflict was individualized. The individual failed to fit properly into the social structure, hence individuals were the proper focus of scientific interest. Social science must study those individuals who don’t fit in and learn how to intervene successfully to alter their particular, inappropriate habits. This tradition is reflected most clearly in the prominent place most social thinkers gave to education and in their concern with its function of producing good citizens. Social transformation was to be effected by individual character reformation—change people’s individual characters and you make them fit properly into society. This view was to have practical consequences in the development of the profession of social work, which was the social science designed to identify individual maladaptations to society and intervene in those cases to help the persons fit in wherever was appropriate for them.

Consistent with the ideologies of competitive capitalism, the interpretation given to the extension of Darwinian natural selection to social evolution meant ‘that every established and settled institution is justified, in its setting, as an adaptation’. 79 Whatever social institutions exist inevitably represent the latest and most progressive point reached by social evolution: in brief, what is, is right.

This close correspondence between ideology and the preservation of major social institutions and interests is one of the most important contextual factors in the acceptance into academe of sociology as a discipline. Sociology became an established university discipline as

78 Youmans, quoted in Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 47.
79 Galloway Keller, quoted ibid., 157.
an ideological handmaiden to the rich and powerful. This illustrates a major sociological theme: that in ‘determining whether . . . ideas are accepted, truth and logic are less important criteria than suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of social interest.’

While social Darwinism, then, had a relatively brief career in sociology, even in the United States where this theory seemed best suited, its more long-lasting consequence was in modern economics where laissez-faire policies are once again dominant and social Darwinism justifies the elimination of any socially liberal program aimed at ameliorating the conditions of the poor. That there were such liberal programs, however, suggests that alternative ideologies competed with the pontifications of Herbert Spencer. Turn-of-the-century America was also the era of progressivism, of muckraking journalism that exposed the corruption of office and wealth, of a reform movement rooted in a socially conscious Christianity. That side of American intellectual life also was given a sociological face.

CONCLUSION

The individualistic emphasis of modern liberalism was influential in social theory, particularly in British and American sociology. Herbert Spencer had latched onto Malthus’s phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ to describe his social theory, a view of the world that was compatible with the Darwinian conception of natural selection. Spencer applied the conception of evolution to society not as Hegel had done, as the progressive working out of a spiritual destiny, but more as Darwin conceived nature: a process with a natural dynamic that, once set in motion, continued under the impetus of its own inertia of motion guided by natural laws. If there was a god, it was better described as nature, fate, and destiny.

Spencer was the unreformed liberal of old, the heir of Malthus and Adam Smith. The ideology of liberalism had changed over the nineteenth century, particularly in the hands of Bentham and the social liberals. In place of the old theory of laissez-faire, the modern liberals stressed social reform and state regulation of the economy. Liberalism had been infused with some of the ideas of the socialists. Spencer combined laissez-faire with the conservative ideas that society resembles an organism composed of unequal parts, all performing necessary functions for its survival, and that society slowly changes over time by a process of peaceful evolution. With Spencer, then, the social theory of laissez-faire—discarded by the liberals—made a comeback as part of modern conservatism.

For Spencer, social evolution was an impersonal process within which circumstances and the environment were all-powerful. According to social Darwinism, Hofstadter argued, social evolutionary development was a predetermined cosmic process ‘toward a remote but comfortable Elysium’—towards eventual perfection. Social evolution proceeded the same way evolution in nature occurred. It was guided by blind forces that no one could control but, nonetheless, always led to progress—in nature, to species better and better adapted to their environment; in society, to inevitable social progress.

In this sense, Spencer was a theorist of the early Victorian age, the period in nineteenth-century England that was named after the long-reigning Queen Victoria. In social theory Victorianism was equated with the doctrine of progress, the belief that society would inevitably improve over time. The unprecedented growth of industrial capitalism and the success of the British Empire worldwide seemed proof that the future [the future, too?] belonged to Britain.

80 Galloway Keller, quoted ibid., 204.
81 Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, 125.
Victorianism also implies strict, middle-class morality and traditional gender roles: sexual repression for women and the double standard for men. The middle of the Victorian age was a trough between two peaks of feminist resistance, the earlier occurring during the age of revolution, and the later becoming part of an end-of-the-century cultural transformation. Despite Darwin’s very conventional beliefs about the natural origins of traditional gender roles, the theory of evolution posed the most serious challenge to Victorian morality and convention. Marx had initially intended to dedicate his first volume of *Capital* to Darwin. When applied to society, however, Lamarck’s theory—that acquired characteristics are passed on to succeeding generations—is more appropriate than Darwin’s model of random variations succeeding or failing according to environmental influences.

The implications of social Darwinism led to a gradualistic fatalism in which human intervention to direct the course of social evolution by bringing about social reforms was considered counterproductive, even harmful. It was better to let the laws of social evolution operate blindly, without interference. This was a new, scientific restatement of the old liberal policy of laissez-faire applied to society as a whole, not just the economy.

It is easy to see how this idea was ‘ideological’; that is, it was an idea that served a vested interest, in this case, the interest of the new bourgeoisie and successful members of the middle class who had succeeded in the competitive world. It is no wonder that Spencer was the toast of many wealthy and powerful members of the upper classes in Britain and the United States. Spencer was a popular, frequently read author in the last decades of the nineteenth century. His views were particularly well suited to the competitive capitalist system that had developed in the United States. At the turn of the twentieth century, much American sociology was markedly social Darwinist.

The contemporary right-wing policy is, once in power, to limit state interference in the economy, deregulate business, and undermine social programs. Globalization in the twenty-first century is predicated on this belief in the inevitably beneficial effects of the free market. Just as Herbert Spencer challenged the social liberalism of the nineteenth century, so contemporary theorists of capitalist globalization have been successful in whittling away the welfare state, which had been so painfully constructed in the advanced capitalist societies in the twentieth century.

When the middle classes had been revolutionary, culture became increasingly democratic. As realism turned the weapons of literary criticism on the capitalist order itself, the idea of democracy began to lose favour. Democracy had been a powerful idea when the middle class had used it to attack the elitism of the aristocracy. It was a less useful idea when particular interest groups among the common people, including women, demanded more genuine political power. In this fragmented context, social theory became increasingly elitist.