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“THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST IS OUR DOCTRINE”: HISTORY OR HISTORIONICS?

BY ROBERT C. BANNISTER

Whatever their differences American reformers of the late nineteenth century reached unusual agreement on one point. Opponents of increased state action, they alleged, were engaged in a highly dubious enterprise of wedding Darwinism to the virtues of classical economics, thus trading illicitly on the prestige of the new science. In *Progress and Poverty* (1879), Henry George charged that Malthusianism was now “buttressed” by the new science, and bemoaned “a sort of hopeful fatalism, of which current literature is full.” “The final plea for any form of brutality in these days,” wrote the Nationalist Edward Bellamy, “is that it tends to the survival of the fittest.” “The survival of the fittest is our doctrine,” echoed the reformer Henry Demarest Lloyd. “The representatives of science” noted the sociologist Lester Ward more soberly, “stand boldly in the track of current events.” Ward acknowledged that appeals to “natural law” antedated the Darwinian doctrines of “survival of the fittest” and “natural selection.” But, he added, “it cannot be denied that these doctrines . . . have greatly strengthened this habit of thought.”¹

This testimony is important for two reasons. Urging programs that ranged from the Single Tax to socialism, these reformers were in common battle against theories of *laissez-faire*, individualism, and related success mythologies that had bloomed during America’s first stage of industrialism. The charge that defenders of *laissez-faire* had misappropriated Darwinism was an important part of their struggle since it usually prefaced a “correct” reading of evolution, the “reform Darwinism” that informed many socialist and neo-liberal proposals. Moreover, these same charges were widely quoted in historical accounts of “social Darwinism” which appeared during the 1940’s and 1950’s, the most important of which is Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944). Darwinism—as embodied in the popular catchwords “struggle for existence,” “natural selection,” and “survival of the fittest,” as well as in a general evolutionism—was, Hofstadter

¹Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York, 1942), 101, 480. Edward Bellamy, *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!* (1937), 34. Lloyd, *Man the Social Creator* (New York, 1906), 218–20. Lester F. Ward “Politico-Social Functions” [1881], *Glimpses of the Cosmos* (6 vols., New York, 1913–18), II, 336; “Mind as a Social Factor” [1884], *ibid.*, III, 364. I wish to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for a Fellowship under which this study was begun.

writes, "one of the great informing insights in . . . the history of the conservative mind in America." The Darwinized conservatism against which George and other reformers battled was real. Their attack upon it was part of a struggle "to wrest Darwinism from the social Darwinists." From Hofstadter's study—and those of Curti, Goldman, Fine and others—a post-New Deal generation learned that the "survival of the fittest," as Lloyd said, had indeed once been "our [America's] doctrine."²

Yet how reliable are such contemporary statements? What conservatives specifically were under indictment? These questions involve not only the accuracy of eye-witness testimony, but bear upon a continuing controversy concerning the nature and extent of conservative social Darwinism in the period before 1900. Two sorts of considerations have already tempered the Hofstadter view. In his studies of business thought Irving Wyllie finds little evidence that businessmen invoked the Darwinian catchwords in their own defense. And on the scientific side Loren Eiseley has demonstrated that Darwin himself retreated from his catchwords by de-emphasizing struggle and stressing the Lamarckian principle of inheritance.³ Moreover, my own reading of allegedly conservative Darwinian texts suggests that Wyllie's conclusions may be extended to professionals and other intellectuals as well, in the sense that the Darwinian phrases functioned in the debates of the Gilded Age quite differently than pictured in the traditional accounts.⁴ What then of the contemporary testimony? Wyllie specifically urges caution in evaluating these statements. But the allegations of Ward and others, although often quoted, have not been so scrutinized. A detailed study of the development of the charge from the 1870's on,

²Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston, 1955), 5–6. "Conservative Darwinism" is also described in Carleton B. Hayes, *Generation of Materialism* (New York, 1941), 9–13, 46, 113–14, 229; J. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner* (London, 1942), 42, 67–9, 100–10; T. Cochran and W. Miller, *Age of Enterprise* (New York, 1942), 119–50; M. Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (2nd ed., New York, 1943), 569–77, 640–41, 670–71; Stow Persons (ed.), *Evolutionary Thought in America* (New Haven, 1950); H. S. Commager, *American Mind* (New Haven, 1950), 199–226; E. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York, 1952), 85–104; S. Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General Welfare State* (Ann Arbor, 1956); and in modified form in S. Persons, *American Minds* (New York, 1958).

³I. Wyllie, *The Self Made Man* (Rutgers, 1954), esp. 86; "Social Darwinism and the Businessman," *Proc. Am. Phil. Soc.* CIII (1959), 629–35. Loren Eiseley, *Darwin's Century* (New York, 1958). Tempering is evident in several recent texts, including R. J. Wilson, ed. *Darwinism and the American Intellectual* (Homewood, Illinois, 1967), 93–106; G. Daniels, ed. *Darwinism Comes to America* (Waltham, Mass., 1968); and John A. Garraty, *The American Nation* (New York, 1966), 475–76.

⁴I am currently preparing a reassessment of the "social Darwinism" of such American conservatives as William Graham Sumner, as part of a general study of Darwinism and American social thought from 1860 to 1920.

it will be argued here, places the debates of conservatives and their opponents in new perspective, and suggests that later historical accounts were in an important sense a final chapter in the same exchange.

Although the *Origin of Species* gained considerable acceptance in the decade following its publication, many Americans in the 1870's continued to find reason to suspect Darwinism. An *odium theologium* lingered, often buttressed by a philosophical idealism that distrusted the “materialism” and “fatalism” associated with the evolutionary hypothesis. The fact that Darwin had been inspired in part by the writings of Robert Malthus made him even more suspect to the many who opposed Malthusianism. What might happen when religion, philosophy, and politics fused, became apparent in the writings of three opponents of classical economics in the 1870's: Henry Carey, America's leading Protectionist; John L. Peck, an anti-Spencerian who in 1879 built on the work of Carey in a discussion of *The Political Economy of Democracy*; and Francis Bowen, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard, who in the same year warned readers of the *North American Review* of the dangers of “Malthusianism, Darwinism and Pessimism.”

Son of Mathew Carey, who helped shape Clay's American System, Henry C. Carey fused Adam Smith's faith in natural law with the elder Carey's devotion to the American dream of economic opportunity for all. Like his father, Henry rejected the ideas of Malthus and Ricardo but he amended Smith's theories to adopt Protectionism in the 1840's. Nature, Carey urged in opposition to Malthus, worked toward a universal harmony of interests, the theme of his many books of the pre-Civil War period. The perfect social science would provide men “the highest individualism and the greatest power of association with his fellow men,” an “association” which the twentieth century would term national planning.⁵ In the *Unity of Law* (1872), his final work, Carey restated this creed for the post-war generation. Rooting social science more firmly than ever in natural philosophy, he drew heavily on E. L. Youmans' *Correlation and Conservation of Forces* (1865), which translated the latest findings of physics into a celebration of the ultimate unity of matter and spirit. So sustained, Carey insisted again that the laws of society and of nature were one, thus further guaranteeing absolute certainty to principles he secretly feared had not brought perfection or unity to society.⁶

In the original text of the *Unity of Law*, Carey ignored Darwinism, perhaps because he suspected the *Origin* threatened his pur-

⁵A. D. H. Kaplan, *Henry Charles Carey* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Studies in Historical and Political Science, XLIX. no. 4, 1931), 82. Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York, 1940), 80-86.

⁶Kaplan, *Carey*, 61.

pose, or perhaps because Darwin's views concerning human society were being published in *The Descent of Man* just as Carey prepared his work for press. With the appearance of the *Descent*, however, Carey answered Darwin in hastily added footnotes and textual insertions. The result was an early instance of the spectre of conservative Darwinism. Carey conceded that most men faced a life of poverty, pestilence, and war. For this state of affairs the followers of Adam Smith offered no cure: material wealth and its transfer were their sole concern, not the mental and moral aspect of economic life. "Need we now wonder," Carey asked, "that a system so thoroughly materialistic should have given rise to a school from which we learn, that 'survival of the fittest,' and crushing out of the less 'fitted,' constitute the basis of all natural arrangements for promoting advance in civilization?"⁷

Had Darwin himself actually taught such a lesson? A careful reading of *The Unity of Law* suggests that Carey compounded several quite different elements in his charge. He specifically criticized a passage in the *Descent* in which Darwin wondered briefly what effect vaccination and similar measures would have upon the future well-being of the human race. Darwin—in passages that Carey ignored—made it clear that his concern was fleeting: men had no choice but to go ahead with such measures. Carey ignored this conclusion because, more than vaccination, his concern was the general neglect of social problems that had "from the days of Malthus" been "the tendency of the teachings of the British school." Religion and economics merged. How could one continue to believe in a God, Carey asked, "whose laws, as now generally exhibited, tend toward reducing the millions to a condition of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water for those few who are encouraged to eat, drink, and make merry, while providing measures for securing at the earliest moment, the 'elimination' of those who, being poor and uninstructed, are incapable of self-protection." Darwinism and Malthusianism shared a common spirit. Each was "materialistic," a symptom of the worst tendencies of the new age. Together they provided "for the use of science a politico-economic man, a monster, on the one hand influenced solely by the thirst for wealth, and on the other so entirely under the control of sexual passion as to be at all times ready to indulge it." That such a philosophy appeared further to justify international warfare, Carey added, made it only the more reprehensible. Thus were routed atheistic Darwinism, callous *laissez-faire*, and for good measure, the militarist spirit.⁸

⁷Henry Carey, *The Unity of Law* (Philadelphia, 1872), xvii, 157, 183, 295.

⁸*Ibid.*, xviii–xix, 59, 370–72. Cf. C. Darwin, *Descent of Man* (2 vols., New York, 1872), I, 161–63.

Like Carey, the economist-philosopher John Lord Peck joined concern for man's soul with interest in his social condition. In his first book, *The Ultimate Generalization* (1876), philosophical and spiritual concerns sparked a vigorous attack on Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. Peck for the moment avoided the social implications of evolution, but in *The Political Economy of Democracy* (1879), he spoke directly to social issues. Peck's specific program included a graduated tax, compulsory education, the appropriation of railroad land for settlers, a steady money supply (neither hard nor soft), and moderate protection in the interests of labor. But more generally he focused on a comparison of the classical English school and the views of Carey, whom he (somewhat inaccurately) made a supporter of his proposals. After describing the views of both schools, and in particular Carey's attacks on Malthusianism, Peck then echoed a charge of conservative Darwinism much like that which appeared in *Unity of Law*. "It is assumed that the best man will win in the struggle for existence (that is, wealth)," he wrote, summarizing the "English School," "and thus the survival of the fittest, in agreement with the law of Natural Selection will be secured." Peck even more than Carey did not suppose that men could "escape the law of the survival of the fittest." "The Superior will live and thrive at the expense of the inferior, in trade and industry as truly as in the conflicts of savages, or in the chase of wild beasts for their prey," he conceded. "But the superiority should be superiority of intelligence and character, not one of wealth and good fortune merely." Government, by enacting his proposals, would guarantee such superiority.⁹

Like Carey, Francis Bowen of Harvard absorbed Darwinism in the latter part of a distinguished career devoted to Christianity and the protective tariff. Like Peck and Carey he was also a staunch opponent of Malthusianism. But Bowen was also a philosopher whose devotion to Idealism gave his crusade an added dimension. In the early 1860's, he joined battle with both Positivism and evolutionism, whether manifested in the *Origin of Species* or in Henry Thomas Buckle's "gospel of fatalism and unbelief." In the mid-1870's he added other philosophers to his list, in particular the Germans Schopenhauer and von Hartmann whose work he criticized in *Modern Philosophy* (1877).¹⁰

Bowen's attack on "Malthusianism, Darwinism, and Pessimism" (1879) wed these several concerns into a plea for patrician fertility, family life, and colonial (or western) settlement. Taking his foes in

⁹John L. Peck, *The Ultimate Generalization* (New York, 1876); *The Political Economy of Democracy* (Philadelphia, 1879), 3–29.

¹⁰F. Bowen, *Gleanings of a Literary Life, 1838–80* (New York, 1880), *passim*; *Modern Philosophy* (New York, 1877).

turn, Bowen first attacked Malthus and his followers for callousness in the face of human misery, an attitude which in Bowen's view was the more unjustified since decline in population during the century had entirely disproved Malthus' theory. The Harvard professor was especially appalled that people of "wealth," "culture," and "refinement" had apparently taken Malthus to heart in limiting their own numbers. He then noted that Darwinism as an extension of Malthus' theory was refuted by these same demographic facts: in the "struggle for existence" among men the lower orders, not the upper classes, survive; "And this victory is a survival not of the fittest, but of the unfittest. . . ." Anyway, he added, Darwinism had triumphed not because it was proved, but because it served the cause of irreligion. The "sole innovation" of Darwinism upon general evolutionism was a mechanical materialism, and it was this that provided "the pepper which made the dish palatable to . . . those English and German naturalists who had a previous bias in favor of materialism. . . ." Finally, came pessimism, which in German philosophy was but an extension of this same spirit, depriving men of all hope of future happiness, and hence of the will either to reform the world or to multiply and "fill the vacant places on the earth's surface." Unless the spell were broken, Bowen concluded, sounding a familiar variation on New England's fears of decline, America would go the way of the Roman Empire.¹¹

Although Bowen implied as much, he was less direct than Carey and Peck in charging that Darwinists literally called for a "survival of the fittest" in society.¹² Instead he merely assumed that Darwinists so argued in order to demonstrate that demography refuted their *entire* position. Like Carey and Peck he reasoned that Malthusianism (which he disliked) issued in Darwinism (which he also disliked). The two might thus be interchanged and attacked accordingly. Neither Carey, Peck, nor Bowen identified specific contemporaries who buttressed *laissez-faire* with Darwinism, an omission the more surprising in Peck's case given his animus toward Spencer.¹³ In fact Carey's cautious mention of the "tendency" of British thought, Peck's obvious paraphrase, and Bowen's circumlocutions make one wonder if any meant literally to identify conservative Darwinists, or if rather they had forged their various fears and uncertainties into a highly inaccurate description of modern thought.

Henry George opposed Protectionism and singled out Carey for special attack. But his indictment of "buttressed" Malthusianism in

¹¹F. Bowen, "Malthusianism, Darwinism, and Pessimism," *North American Review* CXXIX (1879), 450-51, 456, 470-72.

¹²Cf. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 88.

¹³In *The Kingdom of the Selfish* (New York, 1889), 221, 242 ff. Peck singled out Sumner and Spencer. His guide was Lester Ward discussed below.

Progress and Poverty, directly echoed that of the Protectionists.¹⁴ Malthusian doctrines had always obstructed reform, George wrote, and “of late years” the theory had “received new support in the rapid change of ideas as to the origin of man and the genesis of species.” Poverty, a noted economist had written, provided a powerful stimulus to industry and progress. “What is this,” George demanded, “but the recognition in regard to human society of the developing effects of the ‘struggle for existence’ and ‘survival of the fittest.’” The evolution philosophy bred “materialism” and “fatalism.” A philosophy that denied God allied itself naturally with an economics that believed “that nature wastes men by constantly bringing them into being where there is no room for them.”¹⁵

Sustaining these charges was George’s instinctive devotion to Christianity and faith in a universe in which natural and moral law were ultimately one—“eighteenth century superstitions,” as Bernard Shaw described them when he heard George speak in London. George was not ignorant of the latest thought: *Progress and Poverty* bristled with the names of Buckle, Bagehot, Maine, and Spencer. But George’s sympathies and assumptions were those of the Enlightenment—of Benjamin Franklin or Joseph Priestly, through whose eyes he invited readers to survey nineteenth-century progress. The best efforts of social science and economics could not improve the “moral law”: this was the message of *Progress and Poverty*. Purged of impurities, Bagehot, Maine, and others demonstrated that “association in equality is the law of progress,” which in turn was naught “but the moral law.” “The economic law and the moral law” were also “essentially one.” “The truth which the intellect grasps after toilsome effort is but that which the moral sense reaches by a quick intuition.”¹⁶

Darwinism upset such happy assumptions. Throughout his career George harbored suspicion of the theory, a suspicion that colored his thought no less than Carey’s and Bowen’s. In *Progress and Poverty* he attempted to evade the issue. How men had originated was not his concern: “all we know of him is as man.” But his hostility was plain. During the 1880’s he mellowed somewhat, comforted by the views of the British biologist A. R. Wallace (who early preached the “limits of evolution as applied to man,” and who also befriended George during his English crusade) and of St. George Mivart, a leading Christian evolutionist who, more firmly than Wallace, denied that natural selection has shaped human faculties. By the 1890’s George could manage grudging acceptance. “In a sense” all men believed in evolution, and

¹⁴George mentioned Carey in *Progress and Poverty*, 35, 227–28, in *Protection or Free Trade* (New York, 1941), 9, 79, and in *The Science of Political Economy* (New York, 1941), 93–4, 196.

¹⁵George, *Progress and Poverty*, 99–102, 480–81, 558.

¹⁶Charles A. Barker, *Henry George* (New York, 1955), 376; George, *Progress and Poverty*, 508, 526, 560.

indeed *always had*, he wrote. But, he confessed, he remained “unable to see the weight of the evidence of man’s descent from other animals.”¹⁷

The absence of Darwinian rhetoric in George’s writings mirrored these doubts. At a time when reformers increasingly turned to Darwinism for their arguments (“reform Darwinism”), George chose his analogies from physics, astronomy, or pre-Darwinian anatomy. “Evolution,” insofar as it figures in his work, boiled down to Spencer’s formula that progress was a movement from an “indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity.” The laws of society were as unchangeable as the “laws of gravitation.” The “evolution of society” and the “development of the species” revealed a “close analogy” only in the sense that the “bodies,” physiological and political, resembled one another.¹⁸ Whom then did George—uneasy in the face of Darwinism—consider the “buttressed” Malthusians and evolutionary fatalists? The answer is interesting because George did name names, at least four of which have figured in later accounts of conservative Darwinism.¹⁹

The first Darwinist was the British author, Winwood Reade, whom George cited as an evolutionary fatalist, and who later appeared in at least two accounts of social Darwinism.²⁰ The work in question was Reade’s *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872). The author had intended to make his subject “The Origin of Mind” until *The Descent of Man* seemed to leave little to add. Reade instead contented himself with illustrating Darwin with the aid of his own observations of “savage” life in Africa. Reade’s central point, in keeping with the conventional wisdom of mid-Victorian England, was that civilized man transcended the struggles that marred his emergence from barbarism. Reade’s contrasts of savagery and civilization forecast Darwinian blueprints of colonialism that would emerge in later decades, while his descriptions of the origin of mind and of man’s ability to control nature was of the sort that later inspired many reform Darwinist formulations. Reade was also a Comtist and it was his final aim to picture the Tri-

¹⁷George, *Progress and Poverty*, 476; Barker, *George*, 339, 359–60; George, *A Perplexed Philosopher* (London, 1937), 105–6.

¹⁸George, *Progress and Poverty*, 514, also *Free Trade*, 160; *Social Problems* (New York, 1949), 1.

¹⁹The four are Winwood Reade, William Graham Sumner, Herbert Spencer, and Edward L. Youmans. Although George probably made only a minor contribution to Sumner’s and Spencer’s reputations as “conservative Darwinists,” his criticisms of Reade and Youmans appear to have influenced directly later accounts. For Reade, see Barzun, *Darwin*, 108 and Goldman, *Rendezvous*, 91–2. For Youmans see Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 34; Commager, *American Mind*, 202; Goldman, *Rendezvous*, 85; and Fine, *Laissez Faire*, 136 n. George, *Progress and Poverty*, 100–01 also identified a fifth individual—first quoting a statement by the vehemently anti-Darwinian Louis Agassiz that Darwinism was “Malthus all over,” and then rendering a Darwinian paraphrase of the pre-Darwinian economist E. R. McCulloch.

²⁰Barzun, *Darwin*, 108; Goldman, *Rendezvous*, 91–2.

umph of Positivism over orthodox religion, which he did in his closing chapters.²¹

George chose the example of Reade because “in a semi-scientific or popularized form this modern fatalism may perhaps be seen . . . best.” To illustrate his point, he provided a brief quotation in which Reade observed that “our own progress is founded on the agonies of the past.” Reade wondered: “Is it therefore unjust that we also should suffer for the benefit of those who are to come.” George here saw the spectre of Malthusianism. “In this view progress is the result of forces which work slowly, steadily, and remorselessly, for the elevation of man,” he noted. “War, slavery, tyranny, superstition, famine and pestilence are the impelling causes which drive men on, by eliminating poorer types and extending the higher.” He concluded by attacking Reade’s “materialism.”²²

Regrettably, in his haste to illustrate his argument, George overlooked the remainder of the same passage in *The Martyrdom of Man*, an oversight perpetuated in later histories. Reade indeed believed that past suffering had yielded civilization. But he was equally certain that such physical suffering had no present or future role. The complete passage reads:

Famine, pestilence, and war are no longer essential for the advancement of the human race. But a season of mental anguish is at hand, and through this we must pass in order that our posterity may rise. The soul must be sacrificed; the hope in immortality must die. A sweet and charming illusion must be taken from the human race, as youth and beauty vanish never to return.²³

The argument, that is, concerned Positivism. The new agonies would be spiritual, the “disturbance and distress,” as Reade termed it, that resulted from moving from the religious through the metaphysical to the positivist stage. Irreverent Reade was, and perhaps condescending toward “inferior” peoples, and for these reasons he stirred George’s sensibilities. But he was not, as George suggested, urging poverty and social inaction in the name of Darwin and progress.

During the 1880’s George added a second name to support his conviction that “science” somehow furthered inaction. William Graham Sumner of Yale, the “reverend professor” of Political Economy as George called him, offended the Californian’s deepest convictions no less than did Reade, and was a considerably greater threat to the Single Tax program.²⁴ Progress, said Sumner, was the result of man’s

²¹W. Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (22nd ed., London, n.d.), *passim*.

²²*Progress and Poverty*, 480–81.

²³Reade, *Martyrdom*, 543–44. See Barzun, 108; Goldman, 91–2.

²⁴For the Sumner-George exchange see Sumner’s review of *Progress and Poverty* (*New York Times*, June 6, 1880); *What Social Classes Owe Each Other* (*New York*, 1911), esp. 22, 48–52, 68; George, *Social Problems*, 63, 67, 72. George also attacked Sumner in *Free Trade*, 250–52.

victory in a “struggle for existence” against nature—capital being both the instrument and effect of such triumph. Among men there obtained a “competition of life,” the rules of which were relative to the character of the struggle with nature, and which thus altered only gradually. A confirmed Malthusian, Sumner argued for strict *laissez-faire*, and even on two or three occasions (of which George was apparently unaware) did indeed attempt to buttress his position by saying that the alternative to the “survival of the fittest” was the “survival of the unfittest,” a tactic that drew criticism upon him and which he avoided in *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*. However “conservative” he may have been, Sumner was firm on two points: the “struggle for existence” was not necessarily fierce (in fact was relatively easy in the modern period), and was not a battle among men as Darwinian-oriented critics often interpreted it; and free access to nature would benefit everyone (not just an elite), in particular the Forgotten Men of the Middle Classes.²⁵

In attacking the “reverend professor,” George blurred precisely these points, the result being a number of subtle distortions of Sumner’s position. Engaged in polemics, George naturally had little concern for the finer points of Sumner’s position. But more important than the distortions (that need not be detailed here) was the fact that George’s hostility to Darwinism clearly figured in his attack. His charge that Sumner accepted a “fierce struggle for existence” and slow “race evolution” required little in the way of further argument, because to George the phrases instinctively suggested an undesirable state of affairs.

In *A Perplexed Philosopher* (1892), George added Herbert Spencer and his leading American disciple, Edward L. Youmans, to his list of conservative evolutionists. At that time he insisted that he had attacked Spencerianism all along. Actually, *Progress and Poverty* owed a great deal to Spencer. Judging *Social Statics* “a noble book, and in the deepest sense a religious minded book,” George found in it not only refutation of the “expediency” he opposed, but the germ of his entire theory that private property in land violated the law of equity and was at the root of the social problem. Like Spencer, George desired minimal government. Despite its call for abolition of private property in land, sections of *Progress and Poverty* read like Spencer on “over-legislation.” More generally, he shared with the Englishman

²⁵Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 56–57, speculates that Sumner distinguished the “struggle for existence” from the “competition of life” “perhaps . . . to dull the resentment of the poor toward the rich.” However, Hofstadter continues, Sumner “did not at all times . . . shrink from a direct analogy between animal struggle and human competition.” Hofstadter offers no evidence of such direct analogies, and I have been unable to find any in Sumner’s writings. Rather Sumner’s rigid insistence on the distinction was part of an overall effort to salvage classical economics while avoiding the crude “social Darwinism” with which he is charged.

a desire to ground matter and spirit, expediency and morality, in an overarching cosmic law. If in 1879 George had doubts concerning the direction of Spencer's thought, he muted them, and invoked both the name and rhetoric of the philosopher in support of his cause.²⁶

A Perplexed Philosopher, in contrast, was the work of a jilted suitor, and read like breach of promise proceedings. George had learned as early as 1882 that Spencer would not endorse the Single Tax, a loss that was a distinct blow to his pride and his crusade. Spencer was “horribly conceited” he confided to a friend following their first meeting. Spencer has not merely changed his mind, George added later: he was “going the way of Comte . . . going insane from vanity.” When Spencer formally revised *Social Statics* in 1892 and removed the sections concerning land tenure, George published all his bitterness. Spencer had been “dishonest . . . in a way that makes flat falsehood seem manly.” He had “betrayed” the cause. His motives had been sordid throughout.²⁷

In this spirit George turned to consider the evolutionary philosophy. Forgetting Winwood Reade, he moved Spencer to center stage. The foe remained “materialism,” but George levelled the charge directly against the Unknowable, which was not God whatever Spencer's defenders claimed. *Social Statics* (which he continued to praise) had been “a protest against materialism,” a call to reformers to regard, not simple expediency, but “a divinely appointed order to which, if it would prosper, society must conform.” The Synthetic Philosophy, however, was “materialistic” and “fatalistic.”²⁸

Yet did “fatalism” necessarily mean conservatism? Turning to this question, George surveyed some of the same philosophical issues with which Bowen had earlier wrestled. Fatalism, George noted, was very much like its opposite—the emphasis on total will and the “renunciation of the will to live,” such as Schopenhauer preached. This doctrine, in turn, was the European equivalent of a philosophy which in India, as everyone knew, led to a “hopelessness of reform.” “It seems to me that the essential fatalism of the evolutionary philosophy would have a similar result,” George speculated. He then plunged to his conclusion: “as the pessimistic philosophy of the one [Schopenhauer and/or Indians] seems to flow from the abandonment of action for mere speculation . . . so the evolutionary philosophy of the other seems to be such as might result from the abandonment of a noble purpose . . . to embrace the pleasant ways of acquiescence in things as they are.” “It is not for me to say what is cause and what is effect,” he added.²⁹

²⁶*Progress and Poverty*, 359–60, 364, 404, 480, 487, 504.

²⁷Spencer, “Letter to the *St. James's Gazette*,” *Perplexed Philosopher*, 52–61; George to E. R. Taylor, March 1882, Henry George Jr., *The Life of Henry George, Works of Henry George* (New York, 1911), X, 370; *Perplexed Philosopher*, 58, 67, 97.

²⁸*Perplexed Philosopher*, 101–3.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 118–20.

The proof of George's conjectures was Edward L. Youmans, his fourth contribution to later histories.³⁰ Come to think of it, George added in a footnote, the editor of *Popular Science* nicely illustrated his point. In a conversation with George ten years previously, Youmans

fell into speaking with much warmth of the political corruption of New York and of the utter carelessness and selfishness of the rich, and of their readiness to submit to it . . . wherever it served their money getting purposes to do so. . . . Alluding to a conversation some time before, in which I had affirmed and he had denied the duty of taking part in politics, I said to him, "What do you propose to do about it?"

Of a sudden his manner and tone were completely changed, as remembering his Spencerianism he threw himself back, and replied, with something like a sigh, "Nothing! You and I can do nothing at all. It's all a matter of evolution."

George admitted the incident was incongruous. Youmans had "warm and generous sympathies"; his Spencerianism "seemed to me like an ill fitting coat he had accidentally picked up and put on." But such was the effect of the evolutionary philosophy.³¹

George indeed had reason to debate both Spencer and Youmans. Spencer's devotion to *laissez-faire* had hardened as its support in fact and theory slipped away; and Youmans, in demanding careful study of society, often appealed to evolution (although not Darwinism) against reform in general and the Single Tax in particular. But the conversation which George reported not only misrepresented Youmans, but, combined with his other allegations, has contributed to the distortion of Spencerianism in the entire period.

The two men had chatted in the early 1880's, but each took away quite different impressions from their exchanges. Youmans' apparent resignation and lack of interest in politics irritated George. "He would not take the trouble to vote at election time," George grumbled to a friend when Youmans did not share his enthusiasm for Democratic party politics in 1880. Youmans "said we should have to slowly evolute." "And," George added, he "has told me several times that there was no use in trying to fight evils of which he himself is as conscious as anyone, as to get rid of them is a matter of thousands of years."³²

Youmans on the other hand was equally impatient with George, as he explained in an attack on *Progress and Poverty* that drew the above complaints from George. Concerning George's proclamation that "association in equality is the law of progress," Youmans exploded, "It

³⁰Youmans's statement to George is cited in Goldman, *Rendezvous*, 85; Hofstadter *Social Darwinism*, 34; Fine, *Laissez-Faire*, 44; Commager, *The American Mind*, 202.

³¹*Perplexed Philosopher*, 119.

³²George to E. R. Taylor, Jan. 21, 1881 in George, *George*, 343-44.

sounds like last century talk.” Surely George could not so blithely ignore the “whole continent of facts that have been upheaved during the last two or three generations” concerning the early stages of man’s development—whether by Spencer or Bagehot on the one hand, or Darwin in the *Descent* on the other? How in this age of science and induction could George dwell “in an ideal world,” taught by “novelists, dramatists, and poets”? Youmans was no fatalist, but in conclusion he suggested that he was well aware that certain of his opponents would claim so. “Let it not be said that science thus becomes obstructive, and paralyzes exertion,” he wrote, as if anticipating the exact form of George’s later charge; “on the contrary, it is promotive of real progress by checking futile effort, and disclosing the conditions and the way by which exertion may be made more effectual and substantial conquests achieved.”³³

Historians may well judge the merits of the Single Tax superior to those of Civil Service reform, hard money, or laissez-faire economics. But it is another matter to fashion George’s subjective characterizations of Reade and the others into an objective description of the laissez-faire argument: “What is this but . . . ,” “seems to me,” “would have had a similar result.” Was George not thus acknowledging, as did Bowen and Carey, that he found a meaning in the words of his opponents that they themselves did not intend? Did Henry George and his fellow liberals really face a “steel chain of ideas” welded by Darwin and Spencer?

The writings of two other Gilded Age reformers shed further light on these questions. Henry Demarest Lloyd, critic of Standard Oil, and Edward Bellamy, author of *Looking Backward* (1888), agreed with George that appeals to “survival of the fittest” and “natural selection” had strengthened the conservative defense. Reform, in turn, demanded a re-reading of Darwin, which they provided.

As each made his case, a threefold pattern could be discerned. First, Darwinism seemed to describe accurately the nature of contemporary American society. “In cannibalistic times, the best man-killers and maneaters survive,” Lloyd noted in the mid-1880’s, “in a selfish civilization the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers.” As he put it in *Wealth against Commonwealth* (1894), “some inner circle of ‘fittest’” had sought and obtained control of America.³⁴ Bellamy agreed. The Utopians in *Looking Backward* saw nineteenth-century civilization as “a struggle for existence.” “The principle of competition,” intoned the Bellamyite Nationalist platform, “is simply the application of the brutal law of the survival of the strongest and most

³³Youmans, “Forces of Human Progress,” *Popular Science Monthly*, XVIII (1881), 553–56.

³⁴Lloyd, Notebook IX (1888), 215, H. D. Lloyd Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (New York, 1894), 3–4.

cunning.”³⁵ Secondly, each alleged that an increasing number of Americans justified this situation by invoking Darwinian terminology. Seizing upon a statement in a trust hearing in which a witness confessed the “weakest must go first,” Lloyd gave it a Darwinist twist and charged that the creed was that “practically professed” in business.³⁶ “Charity,” wrote one Bellamyite, “preaches that some must go to the wall in order that others may ascend to the top round of the material ladder: which is complacently declared to be the law of the survival of the fittest.”³⁷ Finally, each insisted that, if properly understood, Darwinism really supported reform. “Darwinian principles,” argued Lloyd, “are enough to give a scientific basis to the doctrine that no class can be allowed . . . to hold an exclusive proprietary interest in anything.”³⁸ In *Looking Backward*, Bellamy likewise saw both general evolution and the more specifically Darwinian doctrine of “sexual selection” as chief agencies producing the new Utopia.³⁹

Like George, Lloyd and Bellamy provided few particulars in their indictments. Lloyd at one point in the 1880’s jotted in his notebook an isolated Darwinian remark by the Englishman Henry Maine (the often quoted comparison of competition to a “beneficent private war” issuing in “the survival of the fittest”). In 1896, he seized upon Benjamin Kidd’s *Social Evolution* (1894) as yet another example of what had been going on for some time. But even his analysis of this volume suggests only that he read what he expected and that he missed the unique twist that Kidd had given the Darwinian argument. More significantly, in noting in *Wealth against Commonwealth* that “survival of the fittest” was the creed “practically confessed” in business, Lloyd tacitly acknowledged that the practice was as he himself, not the businessmen, saw it.⁴⁰

Bellamy and his followers were equally offhand in their choice of conservative Darwinists, discrediting the opposition by finding Darwinian meanings where they were not intended. The Hegelian William Torrey Harris was a Darwinist, suggested one writer in the *Nationalist*, because the conservative Commissioner of Education defended competition by going back “as he must . . . to ‘natural law’.” What was this law but “the survival of the fittest,” the *Nationalist* asked, “the acme of individualism, and a colossal selfishness.” “But this seems [n.b.],” he concluded, “to be Professor Harris’s ideal.” On at least one occasion a defender of modified *laissez-faire*, goaded by

³⁵Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (New York, 1951), 213–27; A. Morgan, *Edward Bellamy* (New York, 1944), 262; Jesse Cox, “Objections to Nationalism,” *Nationalist*, III (1889), 325–30.

³⁶Lloyd, *Wealth against Commonwealth*, 494–95.

³⁷Martha Avery, “The Curse of Charity,” *Nationalist*, I (1889), 184–87.

³⁸Lloyd, *Notebook I (eye)* (1887), 122, Lloyd Papers.

³⁹Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 213–27.

⁴⁰Lloyd, *Notebook G* (1888), 112; XVIII (1890), 475; “Kidd’s ‘Social Evolution,’” MSS Additional (1896), 1–3, Lloyd Papers; *Wealth against Commonwealth*, 494–95.

references to the “brutal” laws of nature, offered protest in order to counter the reformers’ advantage. Thus the economist Francis A. Walker in a review of *Looking Backward* attacked such a reference in the Nationalist platform. “There is an old proverb that says, Speak well of the bridge that has carried you safely over,” he cautioned, lecturing the Bellamyites on the past role of struggle. Walker added that he would deem anyone who ignored this debt “utterly lacking in the biological sense,” and urged more, not less, competition. And, for this brief excursion, he became to readers of the *Nationalist* another representative of dominant Darwinian reactionism.⁴¹

Had these charges of conservative Darwinism been confined to openly partisan appeals they might well have been dismissed by historians. But from the start the allegation had support of a more weighty sort from many social scientists who were disturbed, as the President of the Social Science Association put it, by “our friends of the pessimistic school [who] dwell with grim satisfaction on the doctrine that teaches the ‘survival of the fittest.’”⁴² Themselves reformers, many of these social scientists shared the general sympathies of George, Lloyd, and Bellamy, but added to them professional and often somewhat technical methodological concerns that considerably complicated their relation with Darwinism, and in particular with Herbert Spencer to whom many owed a great debt. No one better illustrates the effects of such complications than Lester Frank Ward. Author of *Dynamic Sociology* (1883), Ward held a virtual monopoly in American sociology in its earliest years and subsequently won the plaudits of a younger generation who spread his gospel in the universities of the middle west and east during the 1890’s and after. Rediscovered in the 1930’s Ward seemed to a generation of New Deal liberals an “American Aristotle” whose “sociocracy” forecast the general outline of Roosevelt’s program. Few individuals, it also happens, were more active in alerting contemporaries to the dangers of conservative Darwinism.⁴³

Ward, alone among the reformers here considered, dealt with the

⁴¹Herbert Birdsall, “Professor Harris’s Discovery,” *Nationalist*, II (1890), 61–3. Cf. Harris, “Edward Bellamy’s Vision,” *Forum*, VIII (1889), 207–8. Francis A. Walker, “Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party,” *Atlantic Monthly*, LXV (1890), 261–62. Cobb, “General Walker,” *op. cit.* Harris and Walker in fact illustrate the Hegelianism and classical economics, respectively, that sustained the conservative position during the period.

⁴²Franklin B. Sanborn, “The Social Sciences,” *J. Soc. Sci.*, XXI (1886), 5; J. W. Powell, “Competition as a Factor in Human Evolution,” *American Anthropologist*, old series I (1888), 297–323; James C. Welling, “The Turning Point of Modern Sociological Science,” *Anthrop. Soc. Washington, Transactions*, II (1882), 22–25; J. B. Clark, *The Philosophy of Wealth* (Boston, 1886), 135, 200, 219; E. A. Ross, *Foundations of Sociology* (New York, 1900), 341–43.

⁴³Samuel Chugerman, *Lester Ward, the American Aristotle* (Durham, N.C. 1939).

issue explicitly in terms of the phrase “social Darwinism,” although not until late in his career.⁴⁴ However as early as the 1870’s he had begun, like the others, to fashion an image of a conservative Darwinist opposition. A first step came in a detailed definition of “nature” much like that which Lloyd and Bellamy accepted less consciously. Nature, wrote Ward in an early critique of Spencer, was not the orderly integration of matter postulated in the Synthetic Philosophy, but a wasteful push and pull in which massive positive (“integrative”) forces were necessary merely to hold negative (“disintegrative”) forces at bay. Ward noted further that this struggle and waste had parallels in society. “The wars of men with their surroundings, with wild beasts, and with one another, are the strict analogues of those of the lower forms.” “Even the silent battle for subsistence has its counterpart in the competitive struggles of industry.” Waste was everywhere: “in wanton destruction of forests, slaughter of wild animals, and the pestilence and filth of urban civilization.”⁴⁵

During the 1880’s Ward gradually came to the further conclusion that defenders of the existing order were interpreting “natural law” in Darwinian terms. At first he was merely suspicious: of “representatives of science” who stood “boldly in the track of current events”; or of the social “tenor and tendency” of recent scientific theory. In *Dynamic Sociology* (1883) he voiced some of this suspicion. But despite his criticism of Spencer in this book he continued to insist that the Englishman was one of several pioneers who had “builided better than he knew.” He thus stopped short of charging him with misuses of Darwinian terminology.⁴⁶

This honor Ward saved for William Graham Sumner whose *Social Classes* (1884) outraged him both as a sociologist and a reformer and provided proof of his previous suspicions. Ward’s attack had a familiar ring. Translating Sumner’s Malthusianism into Darwinism, Ward charged that Sumner “degraded” human activity “to a complete level with those of animals.” Refutation followed. “Those who have survived simply prove their fitness to survive.” The “fact that fitness to survive is something wholly distinct from real superiority, is, of course, ignored by the author because he is not a biologist, as all sociologists should be.” At the same time, Ward recognized parallels between human and animal struggle that Sumner would have denied, using such parallels as reasons why Art must replace Nature. In subsequent articles Ward further suggested that Sumner was not alone in

⁴⁴ Esp. Ward, “Social Darwinism,” *Am. J. Soc.*, XII (1907), 709–10.

⁴⁵ Ward, “Cosmic and Organic Evolution,” (1877), *Glimpses*, II, 148–63; “The Scientific Basis of Positive Political Economy,” (1882), *ibid.*, III, 32–35.

⁴⁶ Ward, “Political-Social Functions,” *ibid.*, II, 336–37; “Scientific Basis,” *ibid.*, III, 47; *Dynamic Sociology* (2 vols., New York, 1883), I, 7–8; E. L. Youmans ed., *Herbert Spencer and the Americans* (New York, 1883), 79.

his errors. The Yale professor was but the most extreme of Spencer's "disciples, particularly in America, [who] delight in going even further than their master," he wrote in 1884.⁴⁷

Between the mid-1880's and the time when Ward was forced explicitly to define "social Darwinism" in 1905, at least one additional factor shaped his thought concerning the conservative Darwinist opposition. The assault of the so-called neo-Darwinians (led by August Weismann) in the early 1890's pushed Ward squarely into the neo-Lamarckian camp, and in doing so further identified "Darwinism," in his thinking, with animality and generally ignoble activity. In response to Weismann's suggestion that no acquired characteristics could be inherited, he proposed what amounted to a convenient division of labor between neo-Darwinians and neo-Lamarckians. Natural selection explained man's animal characteristics, up to and including the intellect manifested in commercial cunning. Lamarckianism explained the higher faculties, the "intense exercise" of which impressed them "profoundly upon the plastic brain substance and reaction upon the germs of posterity, . . . transmitted [them] to descendents through centuries of developing civilization."⁴⁸

Not coincidentally, this same division was coupled with fresh allegations that unnamed conservatives were misusing biology. In several articles of the early 1890's Ward repeated his earlier censure of "nature-worship" by "a certain type of mind . . . strengthened since Darwin." Upon examining the "practical applications" of neo-Darwinism he found it "to be strikingly in line with the last described." In methodological terms neo-Lamarckianism stressed the importance of the "Psychologic Basis of Social Economics." In practical terms it produced "biological sociologists" urging "survival of the fittest." "Everyone is now familiar with the general nature of animal economics," Ward wrote, "it is the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence."⁴⁹ George and Lloyd certainly were. And Bellamy, in an article describing the "Psychologic Basis of Nationalism" told his followers that Ward's argument "will bear study as furnishing the best of ammunition for replying to the 'survival of the fittest' argument against nationalism."⁵⁰

The blend of methodological and political concerns in this charge of "animal economics" seemed to Ward only natural. Had not Herbert Spencer in his "Justice" (1891) and in revising and reissuing *Social Statics* with *Man vs. The State* (1892) hardened his conserva-

⁴⁷Ward, "Professor Sumner's Social Classes" (1884), *Glimpses*, III, 301-5; "Mind as a Social Factor," *ibid.*, III, 365; "False Notions of Government" (1887), *ibid.*, IV, 70.

⁴⁸Ward, "Neo-Darwinism and Neo-Lamarckism" (1891), *Glimpses*, IV, 290-95.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 291; "Psychologic Basis (1893), *ibid.*, IV, 345-66; "Political Ethics," (1894), *ibid.*, V, 38-66; "Plutocracy" (1895), *ibid.*, V, 228-40. Quoted from "Psychologic Basis," 350.

⁵⁰Quoted *ibid.*, IV, 347.

tive position? Had he not violated in these tracts crucial distinctions upon which he had insisted in his earlier writings, in particular his statement that “survival of the fittest” had no role to play in modern civilization?⁵¹ Moreover, was not this same Spencer under attack by a growing number of sociologists who stressed “imitation” and psychological factors in social development, an attack that might conveniently, if somewhat imprecisely, be termed a criticism of “biological analogies”? Was not this same emphasis on mental factors reinforced by the resurgence of Idealism in philosophy, and in particular by Schopenhauer’s concept of “will” to which Ward himself was especially attracted?⁵² In sum, if the charge of “animal economics” had roots in Ward’s social concerns in the 1880’s, it was revitalized by scientific, sociological, and philosophical currents in the 1890’s.

In 1905 and 1906, Ward learned that others had their own version of the same charge—“social Darwinism”—directed not only against laissez-faire, but also against certain eugenic arguments, *and* against the view that international struggle and warfare produced progress. The irony, and the cause of Ward’s concern, lay in the fact that he had argued each of these latter positions himself. Since the early 1890’s he had been mildly interested in “negative” eugenics, as the movement to improve the race via marriage laws and other precautionary measures was termed.⁵³ And he had also emerged in the same period as a major American champion of the “struggle” school of sociology, led in Europe by Ratzenhofer and Gumplowicz.⁵⁴ Indeed the Russian sociologist and peace advocate, Novikov, had singled out Ward and the two Europeans as leading exponents of “le Darwinisme sociale.”⁵⁵

Responding to this turn of events, Ward found himself in a quandary. He knew that in one sense the charge against some eugenicists and some militarists was not unjust: extremists in both camps often spiced their appeals with Darwinian slogans.⁵⁶ How could Ward main-

⁵¹Ward, “Political Ethics,” *ibid.*, V, 38–66. Spencer’s *Principles of Biology* (2 vols., New York, 1910), I, 553, affirmed that “social arrangements” nullified the “survival of the fittest” in the case of modern man. Progress in recent centuries might thus be “ascribed almost wholly” to adaptation on the Lamarckian model.

⁵²See index references to Schopenhauer in Ward, *The Psychic Factors of Civilization* (Boston, 1892).

⁵³See “Neo-Darwinism,” *Glimpses*, IV, 294–95; “Social Darwinism,” *Am. J. Soc.*, XII (1907), 709–10; “Eugenics, Euthenics, and Eudemics,” (1913), *Glimpses*, VI, 382–97.

⁵⁴Esp. Ward, “Contemporary Sociology,” *American Journal Sociology*, VII (Jan.–May, 1902); *Pure Sociology* (2nd ed., New York, 1907), 193–220; “Evolution of Social Structures,” *American Journal Sociology*, X (Mar. 1905), 589–605; “Social and Biological Struggles,” *ibid.*, XIII (Nov. 1907), 289–99; “Motives in Social Conflict,” *ibid.* (Feb. 1908), 646; “Social Integration Through Conflict,” *ibid.* (May 1908), 806–7.

⁵⁵J. Novikov, *La Justice et l’Expansion de la Vie* (Paris, 1905), discussed in Ward, *Glimpses*, VI, 269–71; Novikov, *Les Luttes entre Sociétés Humaines* (Paris, 1893).

⁵⁶Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, chs. 8, 9.

tain his positions—which called for neither “positive” steps like sterilization, on the one hand, nor for militarist-imperialism, on the other—and at the same time escape the social Darwinist charge? How in domestic affairs could he urge a “sociocracy” (that would accept permanent struggle but channel and transform the cosmic conflict), against socialist Utopias that would suspend conflict altogether, or a *laissez-faire* jungle in which brute law was totally accepted?

Attacking these problems, Ward decided that the term “social Darwinism” must be eliminated. The tactic of Novikov and the others infuriated him. “The sociologists . . . confound the so-called ‘struggle for existence’ with Darwinism, and very few of them have any adequate idea of what Darwin’s phrase ‘natural selection’ means,” he wrote. “With this vague notion in their minds certain of them have invented the phrase ‘social Darwinism,’ and have set it up as a sort of ‘man of straw’ in order to show their agility in knocking it down.” He protested “in the strongest possible terms against the application of the term Darwinism to the race struggle.” Malthusianism was also wrongly called Darwinism since “it falls far short of embodying even the principle of natural selection.” When he heard eugenics also being called “social Darwinism,” Ward simply ducked the question of its appropriateness and got down to criticism of the elitist views which it masked in the particular case.⁵⁷

But what of his own charges against “animal economics”? Had Ward too not created a straw man? Did recent allegations of “social Darwinism” merely state explicitly what he and others had been doing for some time”? Ward answered in effect that the difference lay in the fact that he understood Darwin, and others did not. He insisted that his suspicions were valid: classical economists were misusing Darwinian phrases to buttress their position. Ward illustrated this misuse by citing a paraphrase of the *laissez-faire* argument by the Italian sociologist, Achilles Loria, also a critic of the classical position. (“Men . . . they say, have carried on a terrible struggle for life. . . . It is therefore wrong to deplore the bloody battles between men and the fierce competition which makes them trample upon one another.”) “He does not say who defended this doctrine,” Ward continued, “but it cannot be denied that something near akin to it is held by many biologists . . . and that it is practically the attitude of most scientific men and evolutionists in so far as they have expressed themselves on the subject.” Like Loria, Ward simply denied their claim to such rhetoric. He had “never yet seen any distinctly Darwinian principle appealed to in the discussions of ‘social Darwinism’.” He then went on to explain, as he had so often before, how his own teachings harmonized with Darwin’s.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Ward, “Social and Biological Struggles,” 290–93; “Social Darwinism.”

⁵⁸Ward, “Social and Biological Struggles,” 291–92.

Ward's "something near akin" and "practically the attitude," like similar qualifiers in the writings of the others considered, strongly suggests that he too was fashioning from his own concerns a portrait of the opposition that had as little objectivity as the cries of "atheistic communism" raised at a later time on the other side. Yet the role played by the idea of "social Darwinism" (and equivalent charges) would be merely interesting if it did not have further significance in both the thought of the period, and in its subsequent historiography.

The popularity of the charge among reformers suggests that certain specifically Darwinian slogans remained highly charged, and could be absorbed by conservatives only at their peril. Classical economics, Lockean liberalism, a Franklinesque success mythology: each could be bent, quite without Darwin, to serve the needs of the emerging capitalist order—by abridging *Wealth of Nations* to omit Adam Smith's concern for the public good, by debasing the "liberty" of the Declaration to an uncompromising defense of property, or by forgetting everything Franklin said about character.⁵⁹ Alternately, a new Germanic invasion of neo-Kantian and Hegelian philosophy fostered an Idealism which served similar conservative purposes, and was especially attractive to those who disliked "materialism."⁶⁰ All contained a significant leaven of Christian sentiment, and in one way or another posited "natural laws" that would lead to ultimate harmony.

Evolutionism and organic analogies also contributed to the conservative defense, without violating Enlightenment or Idealist fundamentals, by suggesting that change comes slowly, that society is a complex organism, and that "nature" provided reliable guidelines.⁶¹ But Darwinism—with its slogans of "struggle for existence," "natural selection," and "survival of the fittest"—was a different matter. Suggesting (whatever Darwin's intention) that nature's plan was no plan at all, Darwinian "nature" presented society a mirror, not of its possibilities, but of its failures. Dedicated to "natural law," defenders of *laissez-faire*—even those who appealed generally to "evolution"—took little comfort from this development. The few who did not ignore Darwin, but attempted to incorporate the new terminology, opened themselves immediately to a barrage of criticism. Of these few Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner were the leading examples, and for this reason figured so often in reform indictments. Yet far from shaping a new consensus, both Spencer and Sumner saw

⁵⁹The specific references are to Robert G. McCloskey, *American Conservatism* (Cambridge, Mass), chs. 4–5; and Louis B. Wright, "Franklin's Legacy to the Gilded Age," *Va. Q. R.*, XXII (Mar. 1946), 268–79. Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York, 1940), largely ignores social Darwinism and stresses the Enlightenment and Idealist defenses of property.

⁶⁰Perry Miller, "Introduction," *American Thought Since the Civil War* (New York, 1954). ⁶¹Youmans, Sumner, and many others argued in such fashion.

their efforts end in futility and failure. Spencer coined “survival of the fittest” in the mid-1860’s precisely to avoid the anti-uniformitarian and anti-progressive connotations of “natural selection”—and then devoted years to agonizing over whether this law did or did not operate within civilized society, a debate which in his declining years sapped his energies and reduced his audience. William Graham Sumner likewise discovered that “survival of the fittest” was a loaded and dangerous phrase, while even the Malthusian “struggle for existence” of man against nature was translated by critics into a Darwinian law of perpetual social struggle and hence discredited.⁶²

The paucity of *bona fide* examples of conservative Darwinism—both in the Gilded Age reform literature here considered, and in later histories—was not due simply to the ignorance of conservatives to whom the new ideas had not yet filtered down. Rather their silence, and the tentativeness of the few who attempted to incorporate Darwinian slogans, reflected the not remarkable fact that individuals who desire stability, consensus, homogeneity, and peaceful change under a capitalist regime—as did businessmen and many of their middle class defenders—found little comfort in a cosmology that posited permanent struggle as the engine of progress. When non-Marxist reformers like Lloyd, Bellamy, and Ward accepted such a vision, they too were anxious to temper its revolutionary aspects. Struggle, all agreed, was a fact of life, but would henceforth be among “minds” and “consciences.” In Lloyd’s version: “There is a struggle for survival among consciences . . . and survival of the fittest.” In the Bellamyite: “a mental and moral competition . . . in which the law of the survival of the fittest will have full and unrestrained sway.”⁶³

But the reformers also wished to distinguish their neo-liberalism from the older creed which it challenged. While their spiritual zeal became the hallmark of progressivism, the same reformers attacked traditional liberalism by charging that its tenets of individualism, free enterprise, competition, and *laissez-faire* were merely bogus biology. Darwinism, far from buttressing these older virtues, thus sounded their death knell in a double sense: first in providing an emotionally charged rhetoric to describe the existing order; and second by the restoration of the older values in a form that discredited their proponents.

The sincerity and persistence of the stereotype of conservative

⁶²E. g., “The Selfish Sciences,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1883; C. F. Adams, [letter], *ibid.*, March 18, 1883; “Cornering a Professor,” n.p., n.d., (all clippings in Folio 206, pp. 44–6, Sumner Papers, Yale); A. Jaretski, *Index*, n.s. VI (Dec. 17, 1885), 294–96; Ward “Mind as a Social Factor,” *Glimpses*, III, 365.

⁶³Lloyd, *Notebook* [Diary] XXXIX (Nov. 15, 1886); I (ca. 1887), 17, Lloyd Papers; John S. Cobb, “General Walker and the Atlantic,” *Nationalist*, II (1890), 135–38.

“Social Darwinism” suggest that its recurrence in reform literature was no cynical tactic. Industrial America seemed a jungle in which human purpose and effort played increasingly less role. Some “rugged” individuals appeared to defend the situation in the name of “science,” and therefore the “science” in question *must* be the jungle law of Darwinism. Such logic supposedly made a special appeal to a generation whose warm embrace of “science” masked a covert fear of its “logical” implications. So viewed, the conservative “Social Darwinism” stereotype represented an anti-utopian blueprint of a world guided solely by “scientific” considerations, thus providing a recurring motif in the Anglo-American reaction against “scientism.”⁶⁴

The widespread acceptance of “conservative Darwinism” in the histories of the 1940’s and 1950’s⁶⁵ was a final chapter in this same story. A number of other factors had etched the portrait more deeply in the intervening decades. Chief among these were (1) a popular identification of Nietzscheanism with Darwinism and militarism before and during World War I, an association that produced charges not only of Darwinian militarism but of “individualism” (Nietzsche) and “elitism” (Junkerdom); (2) the appeal to Darwinism by eugenicists, a movement that made many reformers uneasy, even when it was infused with the humanitarianism of the progressive period, and that became a national concern when Hitler proposed mass extermination of the “unfit”; and (3) New Deal debates in which laissez-faire individualism revived, perhaps *now* bolstered by a genuine conservative Darwinian folk-wisdom such as expressed by one “Middletown” businessman who affirmed “the strongest and best survive—that’s the law of nature after all.”⁶⁶ The fact that George, Ward, and Bellamy seemed prophets of the New Deal added lustre to their charges. The mid-century historians then found additional evidence in much the same way the reformers had: by labelling “Darwinistic” all references to “natural law,” “evolution,” and even “development,”; and by misconstruing complex methodological debates concerning the value of “biological analogies.”⁶⁷ The result in the case of “conservative Darwinism” was distortion and exaggeration that is perhaps better termed—to borrow from Lester Ward—a “man of straw” set up to be knocked down. However wrongheaded, Gilded Age conservatives should be allowed to state their case in their own words.

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⁶⁴For an explicit manipulation of “conservative Darwinism” in connection with an extended anti-Utopian vision see Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar’s Column* (John Harvard edn., 1960), 177 ff. ⁶⁵See note 2.

⁶⁶An important World War I statement of the Nietzsche-Darwin-Junker connection is George Nasmyth, *Social Progress and Darwinian Theory* (New York, 1916), an explication of the views of J. Novikov. The Middletown statement is quoted in Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 50. ⁶⁷Esp. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, ch. 8.