

Social Darwinism

LIT. 215

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Social Darwinism is a belief, popular in the late Victorian era in England, America, and elsewhere, which states that the strongest or fittest should survive and flourish in society, while the weak and unfit should be allowed to die. The theory was chiefly expounded by Herbert Spencer, whose ethical philosophies always held an elitist view and received a boost from the application of Darwinian ideas such as adaptation and natural selection.

Herbert Spencer, the father of Social Darwinism as an ethical theory, was thinking in terms of elitist, "might makes right" sorts of views long before Darwin published his theory. However, Spencer quickly adapted Darwinian ideas to his own ethical theories. The concept of adaptation allowed him to claim that the rich and powerful were better adapted to the social and economic climate of the time, and the concept of natural selection allowed him to argue that it was natural, normal, and proper for the strong to thrive at the expense of the weak. After all, he claimed, that is exactly what goes on in nature every day.

However, Spencer did not just present his theories as placing humans on a parallel with nature. Not only was survival of the fittest natural, but it was also morally correct. Indeed, some extreme Social Darwinists argued that it was morally incorrect to assist those weaker than oneself, since that would be promoting the survival and possible reproduction of someone who was fundamentally unfit. Social Darwinism was also the justification of colonialism, imperialism, and other intrusive exploits (the "white man's burden" was another, almost completely opposite, justification).

“Social Darwinism.” *Replicators: Evolutionary Powerhouses*. Online Posting. 2000. Web. 16 February 2010 <<http://library.thinkquest.org/C004367/eh4.shtml>>