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Darwin Evolved:

The Changing Response to Evolutionary Thinking in 19th Century America

Charles Darwin rocked Victorian America, forcing the cultural leaders of the era to reconsider their beliefs by the power of his argument. Like Copernicus and Newton before him, Darwin's scientific insights drew new boundaries for intellectual discourse; regardless of the specific field, in order for new theories to be considered for discussion they had to be consistent with evolutionary thinking.[1] Essentially, to be an intellectual during the Gilded Age meant addressing the work of Charles Darwin. American society at this time, however, was no *tabula rasa*. Scottish Common Sense and the Second Great Awakening were powerful influences, the philosophical and religious pillars of the era. Evangelicalism blended with faith in scientific reasoning to give educated Americans the sense that they understood the world and its underlying natural laws.

There was an opening through which revolutionary thought could enter America's webs of tradition and belief—the ultimate authority granted to science due to the accomplishments of the Enlightenment. Deference to science was not new. America's founders self-consciously created a nation based on the primacy of scientific thinking, as evidenced by the Declaration of

[1] Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: The Beacon Press), 3

Independence's appeals to natural rather than divine laws.[2] By the time Darwin's ideas arrived on the shores of the United States "science occupied a seat of honor in American culture."[3] Indeed, it was "the standard by which all claims to empirical trust were to be tested."[4] Because science was king, new developments in scientific understanding could challenge, if not supplant, old ways of thinking.

In 1859 British naturalist Charles Darwin published a book that changed the intellectual landscape of the world, *On the Origin of Species*. Consumed by the growing tension between the South and North, most Americans initially took little notice of the theory of natural selection and its implications. Also, it took time for a new insight to be accepted by the scientific community and to be disseminated throughout the public. By the 1870s, however, the fervor for evolutionary thinking had reached a fever pitch. But American intellectual history cannot be organized as simply pre and post-Darwinian. The influence of Darwin's thinking underwent changes through time, with two distinct phases during the Gilded Age. Each stage was differentiated not by additional information or superior argument, but by external circumstances. At first, evolutionary thinking was incorporated into the dominant Victorian worldview; it was used to justify the status quo. Only with the labor crisis and economic depression towards the end of the century did modern intellectuals succeed in using evolutionary thinking to change American values.

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[2] William Goetzmann, *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 17

[3] George Cotkin, Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 5

[4] Daniel Walker Howe, *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 1976), 62

In general terms the transition between the two stages of Darwin's influence can be seen as the move from Victorian to modern thinking. At first, American intellectuals eagerly adopted Spencer's Social Darwinism as scientific justification for the economic inequality and racism of the times. If nature was really governed by "survival of the fittest," then disproportionate wealth was the just reward for the most fit. Further, leaning heavily on Jean-Baptiste Lamarcke, an early nineteenth century scientist who emphasized the inheritance of acquired characteristics, Victorian thinkers hoped to legitimize the values of responsibility and progress.[5] For, if development, both physical and intellectual, were passed on to our progeny, then hard work and self-sacrifice would be justified. Thus it was established that evolution "proved" Victorian thought.

Modern intellectuals struck back. William James attacked not only Victorian values, but the very idea of universal values. Reform Darwinists like Lester Frank Ward and Charlotte Perkins argued that man had the opportunity, indeed, the responsibility, to create an environment conducive to positive evolutionary results. Growing economic and cultural instability facilitated this change in direction, as more and more people came to believe the existing order was failing. Eventually the new line of thinking culminated in the comprehensive government activism of the Progressive Era. Historians can clearly witness the American intellectual progression in thought by analyzing the leading voices in economics, political theory, anthropology, and philosophy. Through an examination of how Victorian and modern intellectuals applied Darwin it should become clear that evolutionary thinking was transformed by societal circumstances from a tool for conservative apologists to the scientific underpinning of modern, liberal political reform.

[5] Cotkin, 20

A good place to start when studying the intellectual climate of conservative Victorian America is the life and work of Herbert Spencer. An English philosopher, Spencer is mainly remembered today for his coinage of the term "survival of the fittest." Contemporaries of Spencer, however, believed him to be an intellectual of historic importance. Frederick Barnard, who served as president of Columbia University from 1864-1888, wrote that "we have in Herbert Spencer not only the profoundest thinker of our time, but the most capacious and most powerful intellect of all time."[6] Poet and medical reformer Oliver Wendell Holmes felt Spencer affected "our whole way of thinking about the universe," and Yale professor William Graham Sumner threatened to resign his post if he was not allowed to teach from Spencer's book.[7] As inconceivable as it seems today, Spencer was more influential in the American application of evolution than Darwin until the 1880s.

So what explains Spencer's tremendous popularity? A cynical perspective is that Spencer was lauded by the elite because he echoed their beliefs back to them in a gratuitous display of self-congratulation. He became their champion simply by saying what they wanted to hear. Historian Perry Miller argues that "undoubtedly the main reason for the appeal of Spencer to so many Americans" was his injunction that "competitive America of 1870s should continue to be just what it was, and nobody should complain."[8] From this point of view Spencer can be seen as the mouthpiece for conservative politics and a defender of the status quo.

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[6] Hofstadter, 31

[7] Hofstadter, 32

[8] Perry Miller, *American Thought: Civil War to World War I* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1957), 24

A more balanced view, however, recognizes that Spencer's popularity transcended politics, that he became "America's philosopher" because he legitimized the entire spectrum of Victorian faith: progress, accountability, and a comprehensible universe operating by natural laws. As the Victorian's world became increasingly unrecognizable, Spencer reassured the middle class. The country was not falling apart, as many feared, but simply experiencing growing pains towards a better future. Spencer almost systematically validated each major tenant of Victorianism. The belief in progress, for example, was buoyed by his argument that "evolution can end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness."[9] Similarly, personal accountability and self-sufficiency were threatened by the alternative theory of environmentalism. The idea that an individual was a product of his environment--and therefore not accountable as an individual—had enough support in 1881 that President Garfield's assassin was almost acquitted on that defense. Spencer's emphasis on Lamarkian evolution affirmed Victorian individual responsibility. His scientific views effortlessly applied to ethics and politics in a vision of universal truth that could guide good government.

The American government had eschewed an activist role since the days of Andrew Jackson and this policy was strengthened during the era of our study by the America's "most vigorous and influential social Darwinist," William Graham Sumner.[10] Mr. Sumner in turn was largely influenced by the works of Spencer and British economist Thomas Malthus. Spencer shaped Sumner's views on social philosophy and Malthus's arguments convinced him that the

[9] Hofstadter, 37

[10] Ibid., 51

"foundation of human society is the man-land ratio."[11] Because the population increases faster than available resources, competition is inevitable. Working from these premises, Sumner championed the theory of minimal government. He believed government intervention in public affairs would disrupt fair competition and unduly hinder the "fittest" members of society. Ultimately, according to Sumner, man's activities were governed by the same natural laws as evolutionary biology and it would be foolish to attempt to legislate counter to this reality.

Sumner argued that man was motivated by selfish interests.[12] Also, following Spencer, he believed evolution inevitably led to progress. Therefore it follows that a government should facilitate competition. An active government which interfered "with natural laws could only lead to disastrous consequences; perhaps it would even push the hands of the clock of progress backward."[13] Sumner articulated his theory of minimal government most clearly in the essay "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over." Basically, the government had to choose between liberty and progress at the price of inequality, or authoritarianism and decline for the benefit of equality. For Sumner, the choice was clear: inequality must not stand in the way of progress, for "human progress is at bottom moral progress." By allowing hard-working Protestants to succeed without the interference of a meddling government, the United States could evolve into a utopia of morality and efficiency.

The shouts for laissez-faire were perhaps the loudest in the chorus of advocates for minimal government. Reflecting the country's ideals of independence and individual accountability,

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[11] Ibid., 56

[12] Miller, 27

[13] Cotkin, 38

laissez-faire achieved the status of orthodoxy among intellectuals. Historian Charles Beard has written that Victorian intellectuals "believed in the widest possible extension of the principle of private property, and the narrowest possible restriction of state interference, except to aid private property to increase its gains."[14] The doctrine gained prominence during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, who worked tirelessly to dismantle the national bank and Henry Clay's myriad government projects. Due to the influence of Jackson, the failure of Reconstruction, and the influence of Spencer and Sumner, Adam Smith's invisible hand became "almost universally accepted by American intellectuals" by the 1870s.[15] Laissez-faire was recognized as such an unqualified good that it began to be written into the Constitution; the most famous example being the case of *Lochner* v. *New York*, where Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wryly dissented against the undue influence of Spencer.[16]

Laissez-faire economics achieved dominance in late Victorian America in part because it appeared to correspond with eternal natural laws. Conservative thinkers had successfully convinced the public that economics was based on scientific truth and divorced from politics.[17] So, instead of being seen as part of a political agenda, laissez faire was understood as the unbiased means for allowing progress through competition. American philosopher John Fiske, for example, "tied the system to God's cosmic destiny" by elucidating its scientific

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[14] C.A. Beard, *Contemporary American History* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 53-54

[15] Charles Calhoun, *The Gilded Age; Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers), 338

[16] Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 38

[17] This perception has made a lasting impression. Many people, both of the Gilded Age and today, would be surprised to learn that early American economics was defined by tariffs and government subsidies for internal infrastructure as part of the American System.

underpinnings.[18] In addition, laissez-faire was so completely accepted because it meshed with Victorian morality: "equal opportunity for each man; a test of individual merit; wealth as a reward for virtue; credit for hard work; frugality, and dedication; a premium upon efficiency; a government that minded its business; a belief in society's progressive improvement."[19] The anticipated result of unfettered competition was a "natural" hierarchy which featured an elite of white, native-born Protestants.

The original application of evolutionary thinking to anthropology was to reinforce traditional values of white superiority. With the legacy of slavery still fresh in the minds of Americans, academic anthropologists shared their contemporaries' racist preconceptions. Consequently, their work legitimized these views with scientific authority.[20] Darwin's impact in anthropology, then, was not in creating new dominant values, but in changing how those values were justified. Racism was no longer justified by allusions to the curse of Ham or inherent inferiority, but through allusions to the incomplete evolution of black people. A prominent example of Victorian anthropology was the 1893 World's Fair exposition in Chicago, where "the best research in professional anthropology, popularized for presentation to a wide audience, helped to rationalize racism and modern imperialism through its hierarchical descriptions of the races."[21]

Chicago's World's Fair was a conscious representation of the era's intellectual climate. The "White City," with its orderly classical architecture and beautiful unified vision, demonstrated

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[18] Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 135

[19] Wiebe, 136

[20] Cotkin, 69

[21] Ibid., 52

the culture and accomplishments of white males. Located adjacent, but outside the White City, was the Midway Plaisance, which depicted "the undeveloped barbarism of uncivilized, dark races."[22] Visitors to the Midway encountered a system of classification which demonstrated "the advancement of the evolution of man" by placing the exhibits in a progression from most to least barbaric. Placement in the progression was determined by the relative similarity of each culture to the presumed ideal of white Protestantism.[23] Daniel Brinton, the first university-based anthropologist, was influential in this model. In his book *Races and Peoples: Lectures on the Science of Ethnology*, Brinton created a "racial hierarchy in which the African stood lower than the American Indian, who in turn stood lower than the Asian."[24] Lewis Henry Morgan, John Wesley Powell, Frederic ward Putnam and other important anthropologists all added contributions to the consensus of evolutionary racism.

The Victorian belief that white Americans were the pinnacle of evolution had significant consequences for minorities across the country. Black people, temporarily encouraged by emancipation and Reconstruction, saw their political power wrested from their hands by disfranchisement tactics such as literacy tests and the grandfather clause. Lynching created an atmosphere of terror across the South. Native-Americans were stripped of most of their remaining lands and had their cultural traditions attacked. Indian students in Christian schools "were shorn of their long hair, forced to wear the white man's clothes, and forbidden to speak

[22]Gail Bederman, Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 31

[23] Cotkin, 71

[24] Ibid., 70

their native languages."[25] Immigrants, especially those from Southern and Eastern Europe, were seen as a threat to the "American Way." Henry Cabot Lodge and other nativists organized political platforms based on anti-immigration policies. Anthropological racism was instrumental in these combined efforts to reinforce white superiority.

America's political and cultural scene was largely determined by Victorian values during the 1870s. Evolutionary science became incorporated into this worldview and was used as the logical support. Spencer's philosophy emphasized progress, self-restraint, and absolute natural laws. Political theory and economics tied evolutionary progress to individual competition and consequently advocated laissez-faire policies. Anthropology sanctioned inherited racism as the natural result of evolution. Dramatic events, however, would tear apart the Victorian perspective at its seams. Labor unrest, mass immigration, and economic depression forced American intellectuals to use evolutionary thinking as the means towards different, more modern ends.

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Class conflict and labor unrest were largely a result of industrialization. For, although specialization did create an increase in overall wealth, the benefits were unevenly distributed between the iconic Gilded Age millionaires and the poor working class. Skyscrapers signifying the immense wealth of the era dominated the skyline and continue to shape modern memory; however, for a majority of Americans the filthy, crowded tenements were the buildings that defined their life. Amidst desperate circumstances, the laboring class fought the status quo. The middle class was terrified because, in addition to creating a movement to combat class

[25] Ibid., 69

grievances, the labor movement of the late nineteenth century provided an arena for blacks, women, and immigrants. The result was "a conflict, much of it violent, as great as any in the industrialized world."[26]

One indication of the strength of the labor movement is the growth of unions during this time. Led by Socialist Eugene V. Debs, the Knights of Labor exploded in membership. Fifty thousand paid dues in 1884, and this number rose to more than seven hundred thousand in 1886.[27] Samuel Gompers and the less radical AFL attracted almost two million members around the turn of the century. The prevalence of strikes was another indicator of the era's extreme class tension. Between "1881 and 1901 there were nearly thirty-seven thousand strikes, often violent, involving seven million workers."[28] In a national population of only twenty-nine million, these numbers are staggering.

In 1877 the Great Railroad Strike was a forty-five day nightmare of violence and arson, resulting in the deaths of dozens of workers and the destruction of over a hundred locomotives. In Chicago's Haymarket Square organized workers were attempting to rally support for an eight-hour work day in October of 1884 when an unknown person threw a pipe bomb at the police. The explosion killed the officer and seemingly confirmed the worst fears of the middle and upper classes: a radical, violent immigrant working class was threatening the American way of life. The Pullman strike of 1894 made a mockery of owner George Pullman's attempt to create a model city based on Victorian values. His workers began to strike when their wages were cut

[26] Calhoun, 58

[27] Wiebe, 45

[28] Bederman, 14

but their rents were not. Eventually over twelve thousand US army troops would be called in to break the strike through violence. The working class, flush with new ideas, was determined to be justly compensated for their role in the emerging corporate economy.

Immigration played a large part in the resurgent political power of labor. In fact, ethnic and class issues cannot be looked at as separate situations because the working class was largely made up of ethnic immigrants. And, far from the stereotype of bungling, naïve laborers "fresh off the boat," the majority of immigrants had migrated within Europe before coming to America and brought with them a confident perspective on rights and justice. They came by the millions; "between 1886 and 1900, 13,259,469 immigrants were recorded as entering the United States."[29] The overwhelming majority made the trip aboard steam-powered ships, as the new technology allowed drastically shorter and safer crossing than the earlier sailboats. Most of the immigrants found themselves excluded from wealth and social status in their new home country. One Slavic-American declared "my people do not live in America, they live underneath America."[30] Eventually, however, immigrants gained political and cultural power when the Victorians' model of America yielded to the incredible diversity and sheer numbers of their recent countrymen.

The distaste most Victorian Americans had for immigration was not due to foreigners *per se*, but the supposedly inferior type of immigrant arriving in the late 1800s. Britons and Scandinavians were largely welcomed during this era. Italians, Jews, Greeks, Poles, and yet still more Irish all arrived in increasing numbers during the 1880s, and their different customs, languages, and physiognomy alarmed many Americans. This fear was due in large part to the perception that

[29] Calhoun, 76

[30] Wiebe, 9

the new immigrants were not only of a lesser sort, but that they refused their opportunity to integrate themselves into the existing American culture. Henry James, the American writer who lived most of his life in England, cannot be dismissed as a jingoist, yet even he reeled at the transformation of Boston's streets. He writes, "no sound of English, in a single instance, escaped their lips; the greater number spoke a rude form of Italian, the others some outland dialect unknown to me…No note of any shade of American speech struck my ear,…the people before me were gross aliens to a man, and they were in serene and triumphant possession."[31]

Many people saw immigration and its threat to American culture as a hostile invasion. Military metaphors and talk of defending America saturated the political jargon of the time. An easy scapegoat, immigrants were largely blamed as the instigators of labor conflict. In that manner the injustices of the industrial economy were looked over, and union activity attacked as "un-American." Machine politics, which were largely based on ethnic loyalty, emerged in most cities. The Irish in particular, who spoke English and had experience with electoral politics, came to dominate the urban political infrastructure.[32] The idea of inferior people ruining the United States caused great distress among those who considered themselves inheritors of a proud American heritage. One member of the elite, Horace Cleveland, wrote in a personal letter that "it is enough to make the old Bostonians of past generations turn in their graves to think of the city being given over to Irish domination."[33] Middle class Americans also felt anxiety about the

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[31] Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 172

[32] Calhoun, 85

[33] Geoffrey Blodgett, "Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as. Conservative Reform," Journal of American History, March 1976, 885

changing demographics. A popular rhyme in Worcester echoes the prevailing nativist sentiment: "The Irish and the Dutch; they don't amount to much, for the Micks have their whiskey and the Germans guzzle the beer, and all we Americans wish they had never come here."[34] But come they did, driven by hopes of political freedom and economic prosperity.

Industrialization and the burgeoning corporate economy created real gains in America's GDP; however, the distribution of wealth was very uneven. In the new economy there were winners, and there were losers, with an individual's financial success largely determined by market forces outside their control. Unlike the earlier small-scale entrepreneurial capitalism, most Americans worked for somebody else: "between 1870 and 1910 the proportion of middle-class men who were self-employed dropped from 67 percent to 37 percent."[35] A handful of men earned enough money to become icons of the Gilded Age—Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan—but the majority toiled in dangerous, dirty occupations. Skilled labor was primarily performed by native-born Americans and German or English immigrants. The unskilled and lower paid positions were manned by blacks and less desirable immigrants.[36] In addition to the vast disparity in wealth within the system, there were periodic depressions which dampened prospects for the entire nation.

In the years 1873-1878 and 1893-1897 the United States suffered through economic depressions. The Panic of 1873 caused tremendous rural poverty and was a decisive influence in the formation of the Populist Party. A newspaper in New Orleans reported "absolute destitution"

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[34] Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What we Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50

[35] Bederman, 12

[36] Calhoun, 56

and starvation among the unemployed in 1875.[37] Even America's joyful poet Walt Whitman was troubled. He wrote in 1879 that unless things improved "our republican experiment…is at heart a failure."[38] The Panic of 1893 forced sixteen thousand businesses to go out of business and prompted Jacob Coxey to lead an "army" of workers to Washington in demand of government projects. Over a hundred railroads went into receivership and more than eight hundred banks failed.[39] Both depressions caused over sixteen percent unemployment and were the worst in American history at their time. Worsening economic conditions challenged Victorian notions of inevitable progress and the self-made man. Combined with labor unrest and the impact of immigration, the stage was set for a reappraisal of the American perspective.

Victorian thinking was increasingly out of touch with the chaotic reality of the late nineteenth century and a new approach became necessary. As George Santayana remarked, "a philosophy is not genuine unless it inspires and expresses the life of those who cherish it."[40] New perspectives would still have to be articulated using evolutionary logic because that remained the accepted paradigm for scientific authority; however, there remained room to maneuver with regards to the ends, if not the means, of that line of reasoning. A number of individuals stepped forward to make the application of evolution more relevant in modern America. The new intellectuals developed dynamic theories like Pragmatism, government activism, and cultural relativity. Historians can see how "Darwinism underwent an about-face" in the 1880s by

[37] New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, April 29, 1875

[38] Calhoun, 56

[39] Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in American, 1820-1920* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999), 126

[40] Hofstadter, 39

analyzing the thinkers that rose out of the ashes of Victorian America—William James, Lester Ward, Thorstein Veblen, and Franz Boas.

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William James replaced Herbert Spencer as "America's philosopher" as the century came to a close. In evolutionary language, his philosophy of pragmatism proved to be more "fit" in fin de siècle America than Spencer's Victorian views. The major difference between the two points of view "was in their approach to the relationship between organism and environment."[41] Spencer and his followers believed man evolved according to unchanging universal laws—thus, Sumner's opinion on the absurdity of reform—while James emphasized the "reciprocal relation between the individual and the environment."[42] Outstanding individuals, according to James, shaped the world around them as much as they were shaped by their world. By not recognizing the changing nature of the universe, Spencer relegated himself to a "pre-Darwinian type of thought."[43] Evolutionary thought had been appropriated by a more modern philosopher, one who abandoned the absolute values of the Victorian age for a philosophy of flexibility and change.

Working within Darwinian logic, James enlarged the role of evolution to include the universe itself. His belief in the contingency and incompleteness of nature led him to one of his favorite

[41] Hofstadter, 123

[42] Cotkin, 40

[43] William James. *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green &Co.), 253-254

sayings, "there will be news in heaven."[44] The philosophical implication of a changing environment is Pragmatism, for eternal truth cannot stand alone, divorced from the world. For this reason, Victorian philosophy was cast aside, not as incorrect, but as only relevant for a bygone era. The new criteria for belief were "philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness."[45] Absolute laws were replaced by a democratic competition of ideas. Different religions were recognized as equally valid for different people. Americans began to accept the pluralistic world they found themselves in. Slowly, nineteenth century thought was beginning to sound more familiar to modern ears.

A new political theory grew in lock-step with Pragmatism. The leader of the movement was sociologist Lester Ward. Like James, Ward was critical of the interpretation and application of Darwin by Victorian thinkers—he even disliked the term Social Darwinism, believing that Spencer's philosophy had no valid claim to Darwin's theory. Ward argued that man's intelligence separated him from the rest of the animal kingdom. Man was not in immune to the pressures of evolution, but he had ability to change the surrounding environment. It followed that man was accountable for society's ills. And in a democratic society, the tool of government must be used to create conditions conducive to prosperity. Ward's "Reform Darwinism" can be seen as a direct counter-attack to the political theory of William Graham Sumner, although both started from Darwinian premises.

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[44] George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 58

[45] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1982), xxiv

Lester Ward hoped to use Reform Darwinism to create a better America, to eliminate the class conflict and inequality assailing the country. To do so, first "he had to destroy the superstitions that still held domain over the mind of his generation."[46] In the realm of politics, this meant the tradition of minimal government, so Ward methodically set out to dismantle that tradition. Adherence to minimal government, Ward argued, was appropriate for America when the country first set itself free from the bonds of authoritarianism; however, in a mature democracy the government is not be feared for the government is the people themselves.[47] Second, the notion of survival of the "fittest" was wrong. Although the white Protestant elite imagined their disproportionate wealth to be the result of their inherent superiority, in fact they were benefitting from a monopoly on education. A close inspection of the lives of wealthy individuals reveals that luck—being born into wealth—and cunning, rather than virtue, separates the elite from the masses. Third, the science behind Social Darwinism was faulty. Conflict had been seen as the defining characteristic of nature, but in 1902 Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* demonstrated that cooperation was prevalent among members of the same species. The pillars upon which Social Darwinism stood being successfully removed, Ward began articulating the scientific legitimacy and potential benefits of Reform Darwinism.

Motivated by a desire to improve American society at a time when many felt America was coming apart at the seams, Ward used evolution to support progressive legislation. Evolution was not an excuse to do nothing, but a call to do more. In *Glimpses of the Cosmos* Ward wrote that because "social laws are really analogous to physical laws, there is no reason why social

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[46] Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 206

[47] Hofstadter, 72

science may not receive practical applications such as have been given to physical science."[48] As members of civilization "man's task is not to imitate the laws of nature, but to observe them, appropriate them, direct them."[49] Bureaucracies began to form in response to Ward's ethic of government agency and the compelling need in urban America. The first national regulatory agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission, was established in 1887.[50] By the turn of the century, the theory of minimal government was completely lost amidst the innumerable government programs of the Progressive Era.

Laissez-faire economics, based on the same Victorian values central to minimal government, was next to crumble under the onslaught of reformist thinking, with Thorstein Veblen standing out as the most enduring and creative thinker of the new school of economics. Veblen was a Norwegian-American whose parents were well to-do immigrants in Wisconsin. During his education he had the good fortune to study under both Charles Peirce and William Graham Sumner. Universally acknowledged as a brilliant man, he was largely excluded from professional academics due to his reputation for womanizing and atheistic views. (Eventually he did secure posts with the University of Chicago, Stanford, and helped found the New School in New York.) The quintessential outsider, Veblen unleashed a scathing attack on the dominant school of thought in his field, classical economics, and the way of life that it justified. Through his efforts the "traditional economic thought was losing its grip on younger scholars" in the mid 1880s.[51] Like James and Ward in their respective fields, Veblen challenged the legitimacy of the

[48] Hofstadter, 73

[49] Ibid., 74

[50] Calhoun, 335

[51] Hofstadter, 147

orthodoxy and then outlined a new approach that incorporated Darwinian thinking in a new direction.

Veblen dismissed classical economics as being "pre-Darwinian," a serious charge at the turn of the century. His basis for this assertion was classical economics' adherence to absolutes and ideal models. For example, the metaphor of the "invisible hand" only works if man is purely motivated by economic rationale. This is simply not the case. Man is the by-product of millions of years of evolution and is motivated by almost limitless desires. Greed, lust, envy, pride, laziness, and love are but a few of the factors coloring man's decisions to act. A natural science metaphor illustrates the folly of basing economic policy on the artificial "economic man." In natural science the concept of gravity is studied in a vacuum, and in this manner scientists are able to learn important lessons. Nobody, however, claims that a vacuum is somehow an ideal state or that man should attempt to create vacuums in nature. Why, then, do concepts like "economic man" and "perfect competition" transcend their function as academic tools and become enshrined in economic policy?[52] The answer, according to Veblen, is that classical economists were attempting to legitimize the disproportionate wealth of the leisure class as the natural result of competition.

Veblen "ridiculed the idea that the Victorian culture of material and technological progress represented the most advanced, civilized society."[53] He flipped that idea on its head, arguing that the leisure class actually demonstrated barbarian attributes, namely its proclivity for conspicuous consumption. Unnecessary expenditure demonstrated not the just reward of honest toil, but a

[52] White, 26

[53] Calhoun, 227

base display of power. Although a student of Sumner's, he was no disciple, for "Veblen's criticisms of the leisure class flatly contradicted Sumner's belief that the well-to-do could be equated with the biologically fittest."[54] Where Sumner saw wealth as the result of personal merit, Veblen characterized the elite as society's predators. Veblen's views were able to gain traction in part because "he wrote at a critical juncture when American society was dominated by labor strife, periodic depressions, and massive social dislocation."[55] The new generation of economists did not see fair competition, but raw injustice for millions of Americans, especially because the new corporate economy placed success and failure in the hands of market forces outside an individual's control. Increasingly, economists recognized that "a new world was coming into existence, and if this world was to be a better world we knew that we must have a new economics to go with it."[56]

Evolutionary economics was Veblen's "grand theory which would do for economics what Darwin had done for biology."[57] The focus of the new approach was on analyzing how institutions and cultural traditions evolved through time, and in what affect this process had on economics. American society was the descendant of two earlier stages of civilization: savage society, which was peaceful and cooperative; and barbaric society, which valued violence and exploitation. As a descendant of these earlier societies America inherited some of their characteristics. Most notably, the leisure class exhibited the barbaric displays of power and

[54] Hofstadter, 152

[55] Cotkin, 137

[56] Hofstadter, 147

[57] White, 81

aversion to industry.[58] Because the leisure class did not actually participate in industry—in fact, flaunted their distance from labor— engineers and other men who produce are the rightful elite. Veblen's argument that Victorian society artificially assigned status to unworthy recipients paralleled developments in another field, anthropology.

Franz Boas was a German immigrant whose work undermined the racist hierarchical notions of Victorian anthropology. Originally a physical scientist, Boas wrote his doctoral thesis on the color of seawater. He changed academic direction, however, in 1883 when he conducted a study on the Eskimos in Baffinland, and by1887 Boas had settled in the United States and was working as the geography editor for the magazine *Science*. Over the years Boas transformed American anthropology, joining the other pioneers of modern evolutionary thinking. Largely through his efforts, "the focus of anthropology in America in terms of both its theoretical underpinnings and its institutional identity had begun to shift by the turn of the century."[59]

Boas made his first public rejection of Victorian anthropology in 1887 when he criticized an exhibition of artifacts organized by leading intellectuals because of its "obvious evolutionary sequence of development based on a biological model of classification."[60] Boas, of course, concurred that man and societies evolved, but he did not believe that races of people could be ordered in a linear progression culminating in white Protestant America. Instead, each society had to be viewed as the result of evolution within a unique context. The savannahs of Africa demanded different adaptations than the icy tundra of Alaska. Under Boas, the term "culture"

[58] Ibid., 81

[59] Cotkin, 59

[60] Ibid., 61

changed from an indicator of proximity to the Victorian ideal to a description of unique traditions and customs. It followed that, "to Boas, a proper anthropological examination involved the formulation of a historical and contextual framework for understanding the experiences and artifacts of the group under analysis."[61]

To accomplish what Boas considered legitimate anthropological analysis it was necessary to perform extensive field work. Victorian anthropologists were well-known for their "arm-chair" approach, but students of Boas transformed the nature of the field by spending considerable time with their subjects. Margaret Mead is perhaps the most famous example. Mead lived on a Samoan island in order to see what could be learned by juxtaposing Samoan adolescence with teenage angst in America. She concluded that there were advantages to growing up in Samoa—less anxiety –and that Americans could learn from Samoan culture. From asserting white superiority at the "White City" to humbly looking for insights in other cultures, anthropology changed dramatically under the modern anthropologists.

Franz Boas, William James, Thorstein Veblen, and Lester Ward used evolutionary thinking to establish modern America. Multi-culturalism, relative truth, and government programs were not, however, the inevitable result of Darwin's influence. Victorian intellectuals such as Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner were the first to incorporate evolution into their perspective, and in their hands Darwin was used to sanction laissez-faire economics and the prevailing world-view of the cultural elite. Superior arguments did not force the change in how Darwin was applied; both Victorian and Modern intellectuals used sound logic in their reasoning.

[61] Ibid., 61

What compelled evolutionary thinking to be used in new ways was the increasing realization that the Victorian worldview was not compatible with fin de siècle America.

Changing circumstances in the United States found little use for static Victorian values. Immigration, always a factor in American society, became a defining characteristic as millions of people from culturally disparate regions came looking for work. The immigrants' diversity and sheer numbers challenged the Victorians' homogenous perspective. Economics played a role as well. The depressions undermined the belief in progress and the new corporate structure took the meaning out of self-sufficiency and accountability. Lastly, labor strife and violence made a mockery out of the supposedly "natural" social hierarchy. It was this context of chaos, and not any advance in argument or evidence, that transformed the application of Darwinian thinking. For, "in determining whether such ideas are accepted, truth and logic are less important criteria than suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of social interests."[62] A new America simply needed a new perspective.

Modern Darwinism came after Victorian Darwinism. In American Intellectual historiography the two perspectives are contiguous "chapters." But we have seen that the former perspective was not a progression from the latter. A better metaphor to describe Darwin's changing influence in America is a presidential election. Circumstances grant one candidate victory, yet nearly half the country bemoans the outcome. Similarly, modern views existed before the 1880s and Victorian values continued long after its "fall." It just so happened that the particular scientific and cultural conditions of fin de siècle America allowed modern intellectuals to successfully challenge the Victorian orthodoxy using arguments framed in evolutionary

[62] Hofstadter, 204

language. As in politics, however, the victory did not silence the opposition. Under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt a new image of the Victorian ideal was championed which combined the responsibility and self-sufficiency of traditional Victorianism with rugged masculinity and aggression.

Roosevelt developed a modified Victorian ideal to counter the modernist developments in evolutionary thinking, to preserve the vestiges of "civil society" from the debasing influence of immigrants and their apologists. He acknowledged that Victorianism was losing cultural authority, but he believed that was due to temerity in cultural battle, not because Victorianism had ceased to be a relevant perspective. His tactic to regain authority was to instill savagery into the effeminate elite. Slogans of "race-suicide" and manly imperialism were intended to instill the vigor necessary to maintain power both within and beyond national borders. Modern intellectuals argued against Roosevelt's attempts to re-build Victorianism. William James especially disliked the callous violence of romanticized imperialism and believed that in modern America the truly "strenuous life" was not physical endeavor but saintly living.[63] And so Progressive America continued as a nation torn between competing views. Modified Victorianism and modernism each vied for authority, attempting to settle the argument that had begun long before. Today, as debates over "family values" and welfare reform heat up, it is clear the argument is far from over.

[63] James, 230

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