

Darwin's Impact on 19th Century ThoughtCharles Darwin: The Descent of Man

I have hitherto only considered the advancement of man from a semi-human condition to that of the modern savage. But some remarks on the action of natural selection on civilized nations may be worth adding....With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed...

In every country in which a large standing army is kept up, the finest young men are taken by the conscription or are enlisted. They are thus exposed to early death during war, are often tempted into vice, and are prevented from marrying during the prime of life. On the other hand the shorter and feebler men, with poor constitutions, are left at home, and consequently have a much better chance of marrying and propagating their kind.

A most important obstacle in civilized countries to an increase in the number of men of a superior class (is) that the very poor and reckless, who are often degraded by vice, almost invariably marry early, whilst the careful and frugal, who are generally otherwise virtuous, marry late in life, so that they may be able to support themselves and their children in comfort...Or as (one gentleman) puts the case:

The careless, squalid, unambitious Irishman multiplies like rabbits; the frugal, foreseeing, self-respecting, ambitious Scot, stern in his morality, spiritual in his faith, sagacious and disciplined in his intelligence, passes his best years in struggle and in celibacy, marries late, and leaves few behind him. Given a land originally peopled by a thousand Saxons and a thousand Celts--and in a dozen generations five-sixths of the population would be Celts, but five-sixths of the property, of the power, of the intellect, would belong to the one-sixth of Saxons that remained. In the eternal "struggle for existence," it would be the inferior and less favored race that had prevailed--and prevailed by virtue not of its good qualities but of its faults.

There are, however, some checks to this downward tendency. We have seen that the intemperate suffer from a high rate of mortality, and the extremely profligate leave few offspring. The poorer classes crowd into towns, and it has been proved by Dr. Stark from the statistics of ten years in Scotland, that at

(SOURCE: Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man.)

all ages the death-rate is higher in towns than in rural districts, "and during the first five years of life the town death-rate is almost exactly double that of the rural districts."...

* If the various checks specified...and perhaps others as yet unknown, do not prevent the reckless, the vicious and otherwise inferior members of society from increasing at a quicker rate than the better class of men, the nation will retrograde, as has too often occurred in the history of the world. We must remember that progress is no invariable rule. It is very difficult to say why one civilized nation rises, becomes more powerful, and spreads more widely, than another; or why the same nation progresses more quickly at one time than at another. We can only say that it depends on an increase in the actual number of the population, on the number of the men endowed with high intellectual and moral faculties, as well as on their standard of excellence. Corporeal structure appears to have little influence, except so far as vigor of body leads to vigor of mind.

Herbert Spencer: Nature Ordains, Government Should Not Regulate

When a government taxes a citizen in excess of the amount needed for defending the rights of the citizen, it infringes his rights. This is the opposite of what government should do. Hence it is wrong. Taxes for public sanitation is in such a category and, therefore, such taxes are wrong.

The theory which uses public taxes to form boards of health or similar groups is not consistent with my definition of the powers of government. What does it mean to assert that "it is the state's duty to protect the health of its citizens"? Does this mean that states should decide who is a quack doctor? Should the state decide what druggist should help a worker remedy a cold? Should the state prohibit unlicensed people from treating sickness?

* For the government to regulate any of these cases is to violate the moral law. Men's rights are limited by such state interference. The sick person must have liberty to buy medicine and advice from anyone he pleases. The unlicensed druggist or doctor is at liberty to sell to anyone who will buy. Any regulation between a buyer and a seller violates the law of equal freedom. The government especially must not break this law.

Illness, suffering, and death are the penalties used by Nature to end ignorance and incompetence. Anyone who attempts to correct these deficiencies by separating ignorance and its penalties is trying to claim Divine wisdom and goodness.

Is it harsh that nature ordains that every breach of law is punished? Is it harsh that if we fall down we break a leg? Is it harsh that agony follows the accidental taking of poison? Is it harsh that, year after year, people living in swampy land die of fever and lung disease? Is it harsh that, now and then, a plague kills tens of thousands who have unhealthy livers? Yes, nature's laws appear harsh. But, it is only apparent and not real harshness.

(SOURCE: Herbert Spencer, The Man Versus The State.)

Partly by weeding out people of lowest development and partly by making * others learn from experience, nature guarantees the evolution of a race of men who understand and act on past experience. If men interfere with the process of the penalties due to ignorance, they prevent progress, If ignorance is as secure as wisdom, no one will become wise. Actions which make ignorance equal to wisdom inevitably check the growth of wisdom. Legislation by Parliament to save silly people from the evils of their ignorance is bad. Sad as it is, it is best to let foolish men suffer the penalty of foolishness.

Andrew Carnegie: The Gospel of Wealth

The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship...The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us to-day measures the change which has come with civilization. This change, however, is not to be deplored, but welcomed as highly beneficial. It is well, nay, essential for the progress of the race that the houses of some should be homes for all that is highest and best in literature and the arts, and for all the refinements of civilization, rather than that none should be so. Much better this great irregularity than universal squalor...The "good old times" were not good old times. Neither master nor servant was as well situated then as to-day. A relapse to old conditions would be disastrous to both--not the least so to him who serves--and would sweep away civilization with it. But whether the change be for good or ill, it is upon us, beyond our power to alter, and therefore, to be accepted and made the best of. It is a waste of time to criticize the inevitable...

The price we pay for this salutary change is, no doubt, great. We assemble thousands of operatives in the factory, and in the mine, of whom the employer can know little or nothing, and to whom he is little better than a myth. All intercourse between them is at an end. Rigid castes are formed, and, as usual, mutual ignorance breeds mutual distrust. Each caste is without sympathy with the other, and ready to credit anything disparaging in regard to it. Under the law of competition, the employer of thousands is forced into the strictest economies, among which the rates paid to labor figure prominently, and often there is friction between the employer and the employed, between capital and labor, between rich and poor.

The price which society pays for the law of competition, like the price it pays for cheap comforts and luxuries, is also great; but the advantages of this law are also greater still than its cost--for it is to this law that we owe our wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions in its train. But, whether the law be benign or not, we must say of it, as we say of the change in the conditions of men to which we have referred: It is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department.*

(SOURCE: Andrew Carnegie, The Gospel of Wealth.)

We might as well urge the destruction of the highest existing type of man because he failed to reach our ideal as to favor the destruction of Individualism, Private Property, the Law of Accumulation of Wealth, and the Law of Competition; for these are the highest result of human experience, the soil in which society, so far, has produced the best fruit. Unequally or unjustly, perhaps, as these laws sometimes operate, and imperfect as they appear to the Idealist, they are, nevertheless, like the highest type of man, the best and most valuable of all that humanity has yet accomplished...