

subtopic

Social Darwinism

SOCIAL DARWINISM and the NATURAL LAW

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In late 19th-century America, the old understanding of the nature and permanent limits of politics was dead or dying, at least among the intellectual classes. The death was linked to a reevaluation and reconfiguration of the [American Founders'](#) political categories, including a [Constitution](#) dedicated to the preservation of natural rights through the limitation of government power. The death was hastened, and arguably caused, by the arrival on the intellectual scene of various doctrines and philosophic assumptions commonly associated with the term "social Darwinism."

Soon after it was devised by the nineteenth-century British naturalist Charles Darwin, the model of natural selection of species in the field of biology came to be seen as an all-purpose explanatory tool that could put all the human sciences, especially politics and jurisprudence, on a parallel track with modern natural science. On the foundation laid by the social Darwinists and those in allied philosophical movements, many of the most influential American political thinkers and actors through the twentieth century came to share six core, overlapping understandings of the nature of politics and constitutional government.

First, that there are no fixed or eternal principles stemming from natural law or natural rights that govern, or ought to govern, the politics of a decent regime. Old political categories are just that, and the understanding of the Constitution as embodying eternal verities (an understanding shared by the Founders and [Abraham Lincoln](#) alike) is a quaint anachronism.

Second, that the state and its component parts are organic, each involved in a struggle for never-ending growth. Contrary to the Platonic ideal of stasis, and contrary too to the Aristotelian notion of natural movement toward particular ends (both of which play important roles in the notion of natural law), the new organic view of politics suggests that movement itself, and not conformity to one's true ends, is the key to survival and what can only loosely be termed the political "good."

Third, that democratic openness and experimentalism, especially in the expressive realm, are necessary to ensure vigorous growth—they are the fertilizer of the organic state. Such experimentalism implies a particular sort of consequentialism or utilitarianism when judging institutions and laws.

Fourth, that the state and its component parts exist only in History, understood as an inexorable process, rather than a mere record of events.

Fifth, that some individuals stand outside this process and must, like captains of a great ship, periodically adjust the position of this ship in the river of History—to ensure that it continues to move forward, rather than run aground and stagnate. Politics demands an elite class, possessed of intelligence as a method, or reason directed to instrumental matters rather than fixed truth. This elite class springs into action to clear blockages in the path of historical progress, whether in the form of anachronistic institutions, laws, or ideas. These blockages will form in the path of the ship of state when openness or experimentalism proves inadequate.

Sixth, and a direct corollary to the strong historicism just mentioned, is that moral-political truth or rightness of action is always relative to one's moment in History, or the exact place of the ship in the river of time.

According to the social Darwinists and those who would follow in their footsteps, a new social science was indebted to Darwin, whose organic, genetic, and experimental logic could be brought to bear on an array of human problems heretofore considered insoluble, or at least perennial. Darwin came to be understood less as a biologist and more as a political philosopher and political scientist rejecting old modes and orders. No one more clearly explicates the nature of this new science than John Dewey in his great essay entitled “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy.”^[1] By the time he wrote it in 1909, he was effectively summarizing the intellectual tenor of his times.

As Dewey avers, the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* marked a revolution not only in the natural sciences, but the human sciences as well, which could continue in their old form only under the pressures of habit and prejudice. To speak of an “origin” of species is itself a revolution in thought, implying that the organic sciences as well as the inorganic are defined by change rather than stasis. “The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life.” Darwin, more than anyone else, allows us to move from old questions that have lost their vital appeal to our perceived interests and needs. We do not solve old questions, according to Dewey, “we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place. Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new intentions, new problems, is the one effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the ‘Origin of Species.’”

Dewey’s Darwin lays hands “upon the sacred ark of permanency” that had governed the West’s understanding of human beings. Darwin challenges the most sacred element in the Western intellectual tradition, one that had been handed down from the Greeks and incorporated into the theory of natural law: the belief in the “superiority of the fixed and final,” including “the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection.” The Greeks dilated on the characteristic traits of creatures, attaching the word species to them. As they manifested themselves in a completed form or final cause, these species were seen to exhibit uniform structure and function, and to do so repeatedly, to the point where they were viewed as unchanging in their essential being. All changes were therefore held “within the metes and bounds of fixed truth.” Nature as a whole came to be viewed as “a progressive realization of purpose.” The Greeks then propounded ethical systems based on purposiveness.

Henceforth, “genetic” and “experimental” processes and methods can guide our inquiries into all human life and action. In fact, on Darwinian terms, change is of the essence of the good, which is identified with organic adaptation, survival, and growth. With maximally experimental social arrangements, change in useless directions can quickly be converted into change in useful directions. The goal of philosophy is no longer to search after absolute origins or ends, but the processes that generate them.^[2]

What exists *materially* becomes more important than what ought to be, because only the former can be the object of the new empirical science. In the absence of fixity, morals, politics, and religion are subject to radical renegotiation and transformation. Essences are no longer the highest object of inquiry, or indeed any object of inquiry. Rather, science concentrates on particular changes and their relationship to particular salutary purposes, which according to Dewey depend on “intelligent administration of existent conditions.”

Philosophy is reduced from the “wholesale” to the retail level.^[3] Through the emphasis on administration of concrete conditions, Dewey claims responsibility is introduced to philosophy. Instead of concentrating on metaphysics, or even politics in the full Aristotelian sense, we are in effect freed to concentrate on policy—or, in Dewey’s language, “the things that specifically concern us.”

Darwin broke down the last barriers between the scientific method and reconstruction in philosophy—and in the human sciences generally—because of his overcoming of the view that the human sciences are different from the physical sciences and therefore require a different approach. This is contrary to [Aristotle](#)’s understanding that different methods of inquiry are required for different kinds

of beings—there is no one scientific or philosophic mode of inquiry that applies across the board. Philosophy or science for Aristotle is the human striving after wisdom or knowledge. It seeks an understanding of the *highest* things through an examination of *all* things, according to methods appropriate to each.

One way of understanding the social Darwinists' enterprise is to view it as an attempt to reintegrate science and philosophy, which had been torn asunder by modernity. While they seek this reintegration, they do so on uniquely modern terms: Philosophy is *reduced* to empirical, naturalistic science, that is, to the process, without the ends, or essences, or highest things. Their notion is that we can reduce human sciences, including politics, to relatively simple principles, contrary to the Aristotelian or ancient view, which held that politics is much *harder* than physics precisely because one must take into account unpredictable behavior, as well as choice-worthy purposive behavior toward *complex* ends—rather than more predictable motions and processes toward simple ends. The human sciences, which at the highest level involve statesmanship, are, for Aristotle, more complex than the physical, and rely on great practical experiential wisdom as well as theoretical wisdom. By contrast, for Dewey and his generation, Darwinism seemed to break down the barriers between the human and the non-human.

Dewey's elucidation of the utility of Darwinism to social science and the new philosophy of man abstracts from the thought of a number of the major social Darwinist thinkers and actors, including William Graham Sumner, Lester Frank Ward, and W. E. B. DuBois. Their intellectual categories continue to exert a powerful control over political and jurisprudential discourse to the present day. Collectively, they point to a view of society as an organism that, constantly in the throes of change, must grow or die. For the social Darwinists, to look backward—whether to founding principles or any other fixed or otherwise obsolete standard of political right such as natural law—inevitably reflects a death wish. While to some degree borrowing Hegelian historical categories, American social Darwinism shares no rational end point with Hegelianism. Change in itself becomes the end, and is always preferable to its opposite. By the early 20th century, social Darwinism would join forces with philosophical pragmatism, to form a powerful intellectual [progressivism](#) that would radically influence the thought and programmatic liberalism of political leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as well as the jurisprudence of the U.S. Supreme Court.

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[1] John Dewey, "[The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy](#)," in *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951).

[2] Dewey, "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," 13.

[3] Dewey, "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," 16.

Published 2011 by the Witherspoon Institute

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