

“THE RISE AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL DARWINISM & EUGENICS IN EUROPEAN HISTORY, 1859-1914”

From a Pseudo-Science to a Justification for Murder:

*“Any struggle legitimized by scientific views justifies racist conceptions
of superior and inferior people and a nation’s conflict between them”*

–The Final Solution

Dylan Fortushniok

November 21st 2012

Theories of evolutionary superiority and hegemonic dominance engulfed the latter of the nineteenth century in Europe and eventually the world. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was dissected by academic admirers and applied to political ideology. Concepts of scientific racism, eugenics, survival of the fittest, all stem from a pseudo-science called Social Darwinism which distorted Darwin's theory in order to control and improve humanity. Social Darwinists foresaw a very different fate for the various races of mankind, and according to MacMaster it was one of, "inequality, racism, with constraints on freedom, and evolutionary motivated."¹ It suggested that there had to be a loser in the cosmic process of evolution, and once those 'unfit' were in competition with 'superior races', they were doomed to disappear. Hence, in order to advance the human race and manipulate evolution, the first stage was to isolate 'inferior races' from spreading and contaminating heredity. These inferior races included those deemed harmful to the state; the poor, socialists, disabled, deaf, dumb, criminals, prostitutes, homeless, diseased, etc. These less evolved must be eradicated, and a policy called eugenics was created for artificial selection with political, social, and economic incentives to remove 'inferiority' from society.

The rise of Social Darwinism and subsequently eugenics in nineteenth century Europe were not only scientific reasons to support imperialism, but also, "proof for hegemony, nationalism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism."² From the onset of Darwin's theory, Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, Francis Galton, to Eugen Fisher and eventually Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* (1925), was seen as the logical extension of Social Darwinism and eugenics. Once added to preceding arrogances of anti-Semitism and racism found throughout the nineteenth century; it fashioned a fatal amalgamation that excluded 'inferior races' and included the 'superior' ones. Social Darwinism and eugenics were essential to imperialism, class warfare, and nationalism.

¹ MacMaster, Neil. *Racism in Europe 1870-2000*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001, 66.

² Stein, G., *Biological science and the roots of Nazism*, *American Scientist* 76(1) 1988, 50-58.

The foremost dynamism that has accompanied Darwin's theory was the Social Darwinian eugenics movement, but especially its crude 'survival of the fittest' worldview.³ Charles Darwin amassed a list of instances where he determined tainted blood polluted an entire heredity, resulting in contaminated progeny forever.⁴ Respected biologists of the nineteenth century like Ernst Ruedin and other colleagues including Herbert Spencer, Francis Galton, and Eugene Kahn; aggressively promoted the racial hereditary argument.⁵ According to Chase, once the 'hereditarily inferior' were deemed to be 'useless dredges', massive killings in concentration camps, in 'Poor Law' tenements, and on the grand international scale of war were now scientifically justified.⁶ Governments utilized known academic Social Darwinists researchers like Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel in order to scientifically validate racial policies like selective breeding, sterilization, and euthanasia. Such policies as enacted through concentration camps in the Boer War, which exterminated 30 000 prisoners from 1900-1902, and in Namibia between 1904-1907, approximately 100 000 Herero and Namaqua were systematically eliminated in order to protect the 'superior race'.⁷ These events were a result of imperialist beliefs that the notion of polluting pure lineage was adopted from Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' theory.

The policy for *Lebensraum* (living space) was not yet concrete in the nineteenth century but imperial programs surged from a vision of politics as a racial struggle.⁸ This Darwinian struggle as an existential battle implied a hierarchical vision of international and interracial

³ Ludmerer, K. *Eugenics*, In: *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, Edited by Mark Lappe, New York, New York: The Free Press, 1978, 450-460.

⁴ Darwin, Charles. *The Origin Of Species By Means Of Natural Selection; Or, The Preservation of Favored Races In The Struggle For Life, And The Descent Of Man And Selection In Relation To Sex*. New York: Modern Library, [c1872], 1900.

⁵ Chase, A., *The Legacy of Malthus; The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1980, 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62

⁷ François, Haas. *German science and black racism--roots of the Nazi Holocaust*, *Journal* 22, no. 2 (February 2008): 332-337.

⁸ Mazower, M. *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. USA, New York: Vintage Books Edition, 2000, 69.

relations. Consequently, due to imperialist agendas, the mounting relevance of conscript armies made the health and population of a country an issue of national threat, “especially as Europe’s states seemed locked in a Darwinian struggle for mastery.”⁹ As a result, eugenics programs were created which involved contraceptive, abortion, fertility control, and scientific manipulation of nature through artificial selection, in order to create the superhuman (superior race) by preventing degenerate and unwanted disease from reproducing.¹⁰ Scientific racism not only influenced public attitudes within nineteenth century European countries concerning nationalist agendas, but imposed them upon other nations through imperial conquest. Accordingly, Mazower states that the British in 1908 had defended the new science of anthropology because it helped rulers of empires decide whether, “races should be preserved, allowed to interbreed, or forced to die out”.¹¹ This is significant to the turn of the century because German anthropologists and physicians who shaped SS racial policy in Eastern Europe during WWII versed themselves with scholarly articles on race mixing in pre-1914 colonial Africa and Asia, whereby their concerns were shared by the British, French, Dutch, Russians, and others.¹²

It became far more difficult for imperialist policies to avoid including racist theories with pseudo-science dogma when confronting ambiguities of the inferior. Charles Darwin wrote that, “[t]he support which I receive from Germany is my chief ground for hoping that this view [evolution] will ultimately prevail.”¹³ Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) was translated into German within a year of its original publication and deeply influenced German thought. *The Descent of Man* (1871) stated that wars between nations are a modern manifestation of the

⁹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹¹ Ibid., 102.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard, Weikart, *The Origins of Social Darwinism in Germany, 1859-1895*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (July 1993), p. 469-488.

struggle for existence.¹⁴ Thus, warfare was scientifically necessary because the ‘superior race’ eliminated the ‘inferior races’ – which evolution dictates – and human civilization would not exist if it were not for constant war.¹⁵ This constant war was needed for the extinction of those ‘unfit’ and to upsurge those ‘fit’ like the Aryan race, Anglo-Saxon race, and other Western, white, wealthy, and influentially prominent ‘races’.

Racial Anglo-Saxonism, manifest destiny, transcendentalism, and western expansionism are all concepts of geographical Social Darwinism as a means of racial classification. However, Warren would argue that a northern Aryan race conceptualization of a Monogenesis origin opposes the Polygenesis Darwinist notion of placing the Garden of Eden in African which conclusively connected blacks genealogically to whites.¹⁶ Although the academic community seemed to side with Darwin’s theory, some individuals – specifically in France – like Mivart published extensive scientific, but racist research to prove that the white man did not descend from apes because that was the black man’s folly of inferiority.¹⁷ If evolution provided the ends, than the Social Darwinism mechanism was the means: increase the population of the ‘fit’ people to displace others in the struggle for existence.¹⁸

The struggle between *laissez-faire* and social reform radicalized as a conservative political misapprehension of Darwin’s theory of natural selection justified policies for not providing for the poor. Darwin’s theory provided scientific justification of the bourgeois principle – specifically the British Protestant work ethic – that God created humanity with intentions to reward work, duty, thrift, intellect, and efficacy, and society would discipline those

¹⁴ Darwin, Charles. *The Origin Of Species and The Descent Of Man* [c1872], 1900.

¹⁵ MacMaster, Neil, *Racism in Europe 1870-2000*, New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001, p. 68.

¹⁶ Warren, William Fairfield. *Paradise Found; The Cradle Of The Human Race At The North Pole: A Study Of The Prehistoric World*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885, 277.

¹⁷ Mivart, St. G.J. *Man and Apes*....London: Robert Hardwicke Ltd., 1873, 5 (accessed November 7, 2012).

¹⁸ Richard, Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*, New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

‘unfit’ who are lazy, stupid, sexual, and rely on welfare.¹⁹ Accordingly, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), wrote that, “the individuals best adapted to the conditions of their existence shall prosper the most, and the individuals least adapted... shall prosper the least.”²⁰ The idea of science as the means to consciously control the mass of society by rational elite, acting to arrest an otherwise irresistible tendency to regression of degeneration, is also the central idea of eugenics.²¹ The 1860’s Social Darwinian thought was articulated by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911) who coined the word ‘eugenic’ (a Greek word meaning ‘well-born’ relating to or producing improved offspring) and adopted his cousin Charles Darwin’s notion that ‘races’ were in a struggle for survival of the fittest.²² Their model placed the German Aryan Race at the pinnacle which started the medical agenda supporting the perceptions and application of racial hygiene.

International eugenic policies began domestically as social hygiene programs. For example, the British Social Hygiene Council called for the, “institutionalization” of the mentally ill, while French society was seen as an object for social engineering.²³ British eugenics was highly based on class due to industrialization. The Boer War saw the creation of the Parliamentary Committee on Physical Deterioration established in 1904 to report on hereditary defects.²⁴ While, some stressed negative measures such as sterilization; others policed positive policies to improve fitness, nutrition and public health for those deemed to be fit.²⁵ However, enumerable scientific supporters of eugenics were obsessed by the idea of social degeneration and preoccupied by the threat posed by the mentally ill.²⁶ Ever since Darwin’s cousin Francis

¹⁹ Winks, Robin and Joan Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity: 1815-1914*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 294.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

²¹ Burrow, J. W. *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914*. New Haven: Yale Press, 2000, 99.

²² François, Haas. *German science and black racism--roots of the Nazi Holocaust*, 2008: 332-337.

²³ Mazower, M. *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*, 2000, 91.

²⁴ Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914*, 2000, 101.

²⁵ Mazower, M. *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*, 2000, 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

Galton urged the government to check the birth rate of the ‘unfit’, eugenicists penetrated the state with racial policies. In Britain, eugenicists studied the problem of ‘feeble-mindedness’ which included the deaf, dumb, those unable to earn a living or incapable of managing themselves or their affairs with ordinary prudence.²⁷ According to Mazower, the young Winston Churchill privately described the high birth rate of the ‘mentally deficient’ alongside the ‘restriction of the progeny among all the thrifty, energetic and superior stocks,’ as a, “very terrible danger to the race,” and in 1913 a law was passed providing for the detention of ‘mental defectives’ in special institutions in order to prevent them from having children.²⁸

Eugenics was an attempt to use science to solve social problems like crime, alcoholism, prostitution, and delinquency, by employing biological, psychological, and anthropological experts.²⁹ Allen states that much of the impetus for socio-economic reform epitomized class conflict from 1859-1914, which resulted from, “industrialization, unemployment, working conditions, periodic depressions, and unionization”.³⁰ As a response to the unfit proletariat, the industrialist bourgeoisie assumed rigorous methods of pecuniary regulation by radicalizing *laissez-faire* and abandoning the weak government system of liberalism. Thus, eugenics was only one aspect of modernity, but nonetheless a scientific assertion to explain the root of social problems as a powerful mediating weapon of class conflict exploited by the bourgeoisie.³¹

Once, Spencer’s Social Darwinian allegory, ‘survival of the fittest’ was conceptualized, it expanded to the application of *laissez-faire* economics on social behaviour.³² Thus, when a capitalist society is equated with the state of nature, a neutral plain where everything is equal: the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 101.

²⁹ Allen, G E. "Eugenics and American social history, 1880-1950." *Genome/National Research Council Canada* 31, no. 2 (1989): 885, (accessed November 25, 2012).

³⁰ Ibid., 887.

³¹ Ibid., 889.

³² Spencer, Herbert. “Social Statics: *The Man versus the State*.” New York: Appleton Comp., 1896, 149.

rich are regarded as the most fit, and the poor are regarded as the most unfit. Accordingly, Spencer applied these social theories and continually pondered, “how can humanity become stronger if they are worrying about helping the sick?”³³ As a result of Spencer’s ideas, the streets of nineteenth century European cities were filled with homeless families, men, women and children, whom governments did nothing except send them to the ‘Poor Law’, a type of prison for the poor in which entire deprived families were incarcerated, often for years. As well, an avid supporter of Darwin, Spencer, Haeckel, and Galton was William Graham Sumner in America, who believed that a new world order was in need to abolish poverty, and this epoch would require eugenics. Sumner pronounced in a speech to an American Diplomat, British Health Minister, and Bismarck’s Prussian Delegate on Social Welfare Reform that, “[p]overty belongs to the struggle for existence and we are all born into that struggle. Let every man be sober, industrious, prudent, and wise, and bring up his children to be so likewise, and poverty will be abolished in a few generations.”³⁴ Hence, immediately following the conference, government eugenic departments were established to monitor and police interior and imperial affairs.

Essential in any eugenic program was the ability to distinguish which appearance or trait was superior. Race theorist Hans F.K. Günther made this distinction, “blond, blue-eyed, tall, long-skulled, narrow face, prominent chin, narrow nose with high bridge, soft hair, and white colour skin.”³⁵ These specific distinctions may have been devised to solidify a nationalist agenda, but it manifested a paradox because the majority of Europeans did not perfectly fit into this list of features. However, many of the bourgeois European appearances in the nineteenth century were not noticeably different from the pure Aryan race, hence the reason why many governments relied on the works of eugenic specialist Eugene Fisher. In his research, he

³³ Ibid., 151.

³⁴ Sumner, W. Graham. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1880, 61.

³⁵ Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, 1971, 157.

travelled to Namibia to prove that racial mixing was always unscrupulous because the African gene dictates that of the white. He collected skulls and severed heads that would be sent to scientists in Germany to experiment on the ‘inferiority’ of Africans. According to Fisher, “the state required [different skulls] to measure a wide variety of brain cases sizes to [differentiate] the pure German Aryan race from other’s with a racial inferior complex.”³⁶ It is clear that the ideas of Social Darwinism and the racial eugenics movement were most receptive in Germany.

Biologist Willibald Hentschel under Haeckel’s direction and anti-Semitic pursuits created the *Artamanen* (right wing youth movement for the Aryan god Artam).³⁷ Members of this group included Heinrich Himmler, (SS Leader) Rudolf Hoess, (Commandant of Auschwitz) and Walther Darré, (*Lebensraum* Minister) in the east.³⁸ Hentschel and *Artamanen*, penetrated the young minds of influential figures in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe with notions of scientific racism being an eternal struggle: “The earth continues to go round whether it is the man who kills the tiger or the tiger which eats the man. The strongest assert his will, it is the law of nature.”³⁹ Physician Eugen Fischer wrote *Outline of Human Genetic and Racial Hygiene (1909-1927)*, and subsequently he became Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, to plan for the sterilization of ‘inferior races’.⁴⁰

Consequently, nationalism became so extreme that the inferior groups were gradually expanded to all those that did not fit into the nucleus, but were merely an internal infirmity. Policies would encompass monitoring the birth rate of the poor, even slightly ill, any form of disability like deafness, and any inept child or orphan without a parent or means of education.⁴¹

³⁶ François, Haas. *German science and black racism--roots of the Nazi Holocaust*, 2008, 335-337.

³⁷ Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, 1971, 158.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁴⁰ François, Haas. *German science and black racism--roots of the Nazi Holocaust*, 2008, 336-337.

⁴¹ Nordenskiöld, E. *The History of Biology*, New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1935, 522.

For that reason, education played a significant role not only into policies being created, but upheld by those ‘fit’, so the eradication of the unfit would be seamless and efficient. Thus, the history of ethnocentrism, racism, nationalism, and xenophobia has also been a history of the use of science and the actions of scientists in support of these ideas and social movements.

Darwinism was revolutionary because it morphed European ideology by providing scientific explanations in biology for racial superiority of imperialist motives, along with anthropological studies to determine that natural environmental selection thereby justified nationalism.⁴² As a result, Social Darwinism emerged to become the leading form of thought in biology from C.H. Pearson’s *National Life and Character* (1893), to Benjamin Kidd’s *Social Evolution* (1894), who argued that biology offered legitimate forms of competition which in turn justified the struggle for dominance in nature between human beings.⁴³ Racial biology in Europe was a symptom of exaggerated nationalism as an attempt to justify it on a scientific basis.⁴⁴

Social Darwinism was an extraordinarily influential nineteenth century doctrine which claimed to synthesize the ideology of evolutionary progress. Its greatest proprietor Herbert Spencer wrote that, “[t]he poverty of the incompetent, the distress of the careless, the elimination of the lazy and that pressure of the strong which sweeps aside the weak and reduces so many of them to misery, are the necessary results of an enlightened and beneficial general law.”⁴⁵ Hence, Roucloux explains that the best potential adaptation to a society in which uninhibited competition gains approval as a fact of life is where the fittest survive.⁴⁶ Therefore, eugenics

⁴² Burrow, . *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914.*, 2000, 93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁴ Julian Huxley and A.C. Haddon, *We Europeans: A Survey of “Racial” Problems* (1906), New York: Vintage, 1998, 103.

⁴⁵ Spencer, Herbert, and J. D. Y. Peel. *On Social Evolution; Selected Writings*. Edited and with an intro. by J. D. Y. Peel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1879] 1972, 92.

⁴⁶ Roucloux, Joël. "Can Democracy Survive the Disgust of Man for Man? From Social Darwinism to Eugenics." *Diogenes* 49, no. 3 (September 2002): 47. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed November 24, 2012).

aims to hurry the disappearance of those ‘unfit’, which Social Darwinism defines as rewarding and unavoidable. Ironically, the self-declared ‘humanist’ Herbert Spencer might have reluctantly contributed to the appalling process of dehumanization as seen in ‘The Final Solution’.

The rise and impact of Social Darwinism and eugenics in European history from 1859-1914 was so profound and revolutionary that theories of scientific racism and survival of the fittest not only fashioned an early twenty-first century of fear, darkness, and the annihilation of entire races, but in the eyes of many, the pseudo-science was justifiable. Accordingly, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution was not only twisted by renown and creditable academics like Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton, but twisted into policies for hegemonic dominance globally and bureaucratic oppression domestically over those inferior. Therefore, Social Darwinism and eugenics were scientific justifications for imperial policies, class oppression, and nationalistic hegemony across Europe. Social Darwinism and eugenic policies are still omnipresent in twenty-first modern capitalist societies. If one observes with insight, the xenophobia of Europe’s late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries is everywhere. Yet, it may be even more terrifying now because no one takes the time to notice.

Bibliography

- Allen, G E. "Eugenics and American social history, 1880-1950." *Genome/National Research Council Canada* 31, no. 2 (1989): 885-889, (accessed November 25, 2012).
- Burrow, J. W. *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Chase, A. *The Legacy of Malthus; The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1980.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Origin Of Species By Means Of Natural Selection; Or, The Preservation Of Favored Races In The Struggle For Life, And The Descent Of Man And Selection In Relation To Sex*. New York: Modern Library, [c1872], 1900.
- Gasman, Daniel. *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in Ernst Haeckel and the German Monist League*. United States: American Elsevier Publishing Company Inc., 1971.
- Haas, François. *German science and black racism--roots of the Nazi Holocaust*. *FASEB Journal* 22, no. 2 (February 2008): 332-337. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database (accessed November 4, 2012).
- Julian Huxley and A.C. Haddon. *We Europeans: A Survey of "Racial" Problems (1906)*. New York: Vintage, 1998, 103.
- Ludmerer, K. *Eugenics*, In: *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, Edited by Mark Lappe, New York, New York: The Free Press, 1978, 450-460.
- MacMaster, Neil. *Racism in Europe 1870-2000*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001.
- Mazower, M. *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. USA, New York: Vintage Books Edition, 2000.
- Mivart, St. G.J. *Man and Apes....* London: Robert Hardwicke Ltd., 1873, 5 (accessed November 7, 2012).
- Nordenskiöld, E. *The History of Biology*. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1935.
- Pearson, Karl. *National Life from the Standpoint of Science (1900)*, 2d Ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919, pp. 21-22, 26-27, 36-37, 43-47, 52-54, 62-64.

- Roucloux, Joël. *Can Democracy Survive the Disgust of Man for Man? From Social Darwinism to Eugenics*. *Diogenes* 49, no. 3, (September 2002): 47. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database (accessed November 3, 2012).
- Spencer, Herbert, and J. D. Y. Peel. *On Social Evolution; Selected Writings*. Edited and with an intro. by J. D. Y. Peel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1879] 1972.
- Spencer, Herbert. "Social Statics: *The Man versus the State*." New York: D. Appleton and Company. 1896.
- Stein, G., *Biological science and the roots of Nazism*. *American Scientist* 76(1):50–58, 1988.
- Summer, W. Graham. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1880.
- Van Everie, John. *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination, or Negroes as a Subordinate Race*. New York: Penn-State University Press, 1867 (accessed November 6, 2012).
- Vorachek, Laura. "Mesmerists And Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, And Eugenics in *Trilby*." *Victorian Literature & Culture* 37, no. 1 (March 2009): 197-215. Historical Abstracts with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed November 24, 2012).
- Warren, William Fairfield. *Paradise Found; The Cradle Of The Human Race At The North Pole: A Study Of The Prehistoric World* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885.
- Weikart, Richard. *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Weikart, Richard. *The Origins of Social Darwinism in Germany, 1859-1895*. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (July 1993), 469-488.
- Winks, Robin and Joan Neuberger. *Europe and the Making of Modernity: 1815-1914*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.