SOCIAL DARWINISM

Every movement develops a philosophy of its own to justify its actions or ideas. Big business did this too.

The philosophy stemmed from a biological theory of evolution developed by a man named Charles Darwin. It said that living species evolved from lower to higher stages through survival of the fittest.

It was a man named Herbert Spencer, who took Darwin's theory and applied it to society as a whole, instead of to a biological species. His applied theory became known as Social Darwinism. It held that society is like the state of nature — some are fit, some are not. The fit will trample the unfit in the struggle for survival. It is good for the unfit to be left behind, according to his theory, because then all that is left are the fit in society and society will be improved by this process.

Material success became the measurement of fitness. The big industrialists became the leading figures and those most looked up to, as they were obviously the most fit. Failure was not seen as a result of circumstances, but only as the failure of the individual through laziness, etc.

This theory was not just the philosophy of a few men used to justify their action. It was believed by thousands of struggling individuals hoping to prove they were among the fit.

Some capitalists also justified their enormous accumulation of wealth by the Gospel of Wealth. This theory held that the rich were given their wealth by God because they were most capable of handling it well and they were to use it to benefit society. This did not mean they had to give it away, however. Carnegie, the main proponent, gave much to charities and founded public libraries and sponsored research. Rockefeller also was a philanthropist and established several foundations for education and research. This theory also did not include handouts to the poor as that would be aiding the unfit. The types of philanthropies sponsored by Carnegie and Rockefeller would enable the ambitious to better themselves (educational grants, libraries, and endowments for the arts).

The main criticism of this brand of capitalism was that it was not free enterprise. The small businessman found little opportunity in the economy anymore as he was driven from business by the large enterprises. The idea that it brought progress to society because big business was more efficient, didn't always hold true as elimination of competition also eliminated or reduced the stimulus to improve quality or offer reasonable prices.

Around the turn of the century (1900) a new philosophy began to dominate society. This philosophy is called Reform Darwinism and holds that progress in society comes not from sitting around waiting for natural selection to work wonders, but through organized planning and action towards a desired end. Those who subscribed to this philosophy believed that man shaped his own world by determining the kind of society that was desirable and then working collectively toward that goal. This kind of action can be seen in the collective actions of labor organizations, women's Christian Temperance Movement, and the other reform groups of the late 1800's and early 1900's that tried to change society through group actions.
HERBERT SPENCER’S CATEGORICAL REAUTHORIZATION OF STATE INTERFERENCE WITH THE
“NATURAL” UNIMPEDED GROWTH OF SOCIETY LED HIM TO OPPOSE ALL STATE AID TO THE
POOR. THEY WERE UNFIT, HE SAID, AND SHOULD BE ELIMINATED.

“The whole effort of nature is to get rid of much, to clear the world
of them, and make room for better. Nature is as insistent upon fitness of
mental character as she is upon physical character, and radical detects are
as much a cause of death in the one case as in the other. He who loses his
life because of stupidity, vice, or idleness is in the same class as the
victims of weak viscera or malformed limbs. Under nature’s laws all alike
are put on trial. If they are sufficiently complete to live, they go live,
and it is well they should live. If they are not sufficiently complete to
live, they die, and it is best they should die.”

Chauncey DePew told the guests at great dinners and public banquets of New
York City that they represented the survival of the fittest of the thousands
who came there in search of fame, fortune or power, and that it was
“superior ability, foresight, and adaptability” that brought them
successfully through the fierce competitions of the metropolis.

Walt Whitman wrote:

“I perceive clearly that the extreme business energy and this almost
maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the United States, are parts of
amelioration and progress, indispensably needed to prepare the very results
I demand. My theory includes riches and the getting of riches.”

ERIC S. GOLDAN IN BENDERVOS WITH DESTINY:

“Now John D. Rockefeller, with the same confidence that he had in his
latest laboratory, could explain the Standard Oil trust to his Sunday-school
class as:

‘merely a survival of the fittest...The American beauty rose can be
produced in the splendor and the fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder
only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an
evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature
and a law of God.’

Now the general manager of the Atlantic works of Pittsburgh, asked what
might be done to raise the wages of employees who made seventy-five cents a
day, was able to reply, ‘I don’t think anything could be done...The law of
the survival of the fittest governs that.’

Equally common was the emphasis of the famous New York preacher, Henry
Ward Beecher. ‘God has intended the great to be great and the little to be
little,’ Beecher cried. If this meant that Henry Ward Beecher received
forty thousand dollars a year and a laborer one dollar a day, there was no
cause for whispering at God’s decisions. A dollar a day, Beecher explained,
was not enough to support a man and five children if a man would insist on
smoking and drinking beer...But the man who cannot live on bread and water
is not fit to live.’

But in the University of Kansas, William Allen White was learning
economic predestination is still mere direct form. Poverty was ‘an evidence
of sin, or worse, weakness,’ White heard from his professors. Those who
championed the poor were ‘worse than the poor themselves, for they would
pander to poverty and profit by it.’

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Dialog from a lecture by William Graham Sumner:

"Professor, don't you believe in any government aid to industries?"
"No! It's root, hog, or die."
"Yes, but hasn't the hog got a right to root?"
"There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living."
"You believe then, Professor, in only one system, the contract-competitive system?"
"That's the only sound economic system. All others are fallacies."
"Well, suppose a professor of political economy came along and took your job away from you. Wouldn't you be sore?"
"Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me."

General Voseer Law:

"The brutality of all national development is apparent, and we make no excuse for it. To conceal it would be a denial of fact; to glaze it over, an apology to truth. There is little in life that is not brutal except our ideal. As we increase the aggregate of individuals and their collective activities, we increase proportionately their brutality."

Richard Hofstadter:

"As the United States stepped upon the stage of empire, Americans' thought turned once again to the subjects of war and empire; opponents and defenders of expansion and conquest marshalled arguments for their causes. After the fashion of late nineteenth-century thought, they sought in the world of nature a larger justification for their ideals. The use of natural selection as a vindication of militarism or imperialism was not new in European or American thought. Imperialists, calling upon Darwinism in defense of the subjugation of weaker races, could point to Darwin's books. Darwin had been talking about pigeons, but the imperialists saw no reason why his theories should not apply to men, and the whole spirit of the naturalistic world-view seemed to call for a vigorous and unrelenting thoroughness in the application of biological concepts. Had not Darwin himself written complacently in the Descent of Man that the [italics missing] races would disappear before the advance of higher civilizations? Militarists could also point to the harsh fact of the elimination of the unfit as an urgent reason for cultivating the martial virtues and keeping the national powder dry. After the Franco-Prussian War, both sides had for the first time invoked theoretical Darwinism."

Brooks Adams:

"Moreover, Americans must recognize that this is war to the death...a struggle no longer against single nations but against a continent. There is not room in the economy of the world for two centers of wealth and empire. One organism, in the end, will destroy the other. The weaker must succumb. Under commercial competition, that society will survive which works cheapest; but to be underseed is often more fatal to a population than to be conquered."

Julius Pratt (after Mexican War):

The Mexican race now sees in the fate of the aborigines (natives) of the north, their own inevitable destiny," an expansionist had written. "They must amalgamate (blend in) and be lost in the superior vigor of the Anglo-Saxon race, or they must utterly perish."
Albert Beveridge, 1899, U.S. Senate debate over annexation of Philippines:

"God has not bee preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns...He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savages and semi-poples."

Theodore Roosevelt (1899) in The Strenuous Life:

"In this world the nation that has trained itself to a career of unwarlike and isolated ease is bound, in the end, to go down before the other nations which have not lost the manly and adventurouse qualities..."

"...The timid man, the lazy man, the man who disgraces his country, the over-civilized man who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, the man of dull mind whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty life that thrills 'etern men with empires in their brains'...all these, of course, shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties...

I preach to you, then, my countrymen, that our country calls not for the life of ease but for the life of strenuous endeavor. The twentieth century looms before us big with the fate of many nations. If we stand idly by, if we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at hazard of their lives and at the risk of all they hold dear, then the bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and win for themselves the domination of the world."

Alfred T. Mahan:

"All around us now is strife: 'the struggle of life,' 'the race of life,' are phrases so familiar that we do not feel their significance till we stop to think about them. Everywhere nation is arrayed against nation; our own no less than the others."