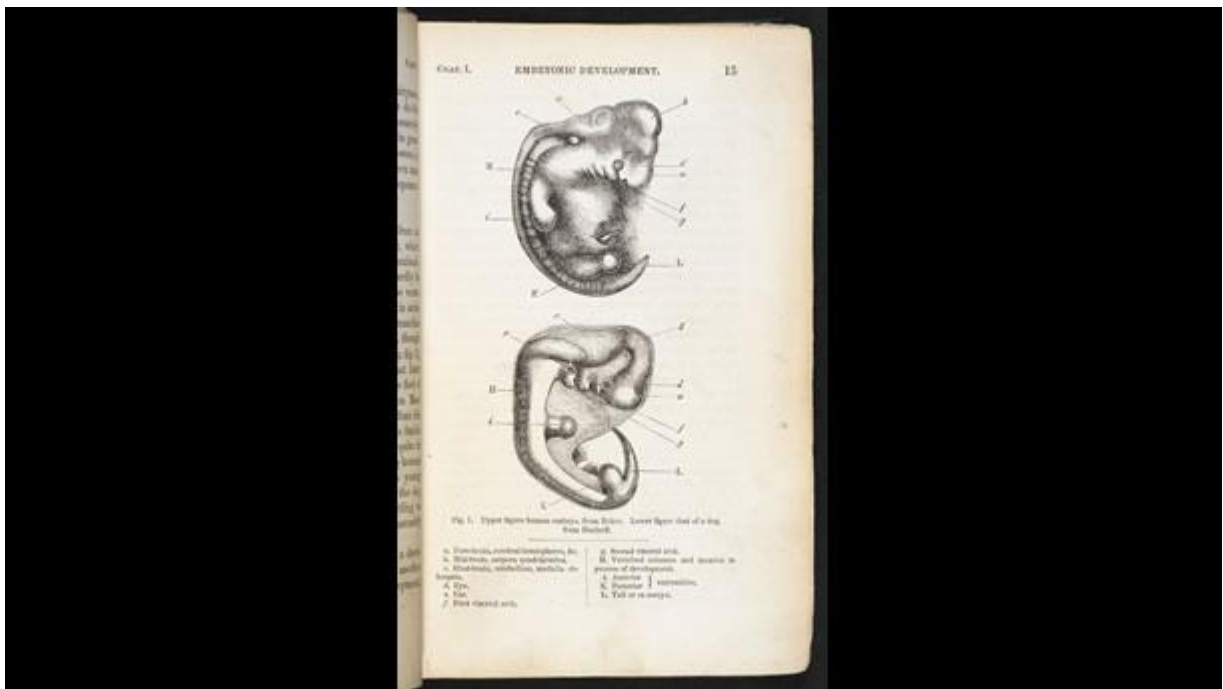


Post Darwin: social Darwinism, degeneration, eugenics

Dr Carolyn Burdett explores how Victorian thinkers used Darwin's theory of evolution in forming their own social, economic and racial theories, thereby extending Darwin's influence far beyond its original sphere.

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* did not include human beings in its discussions of species evolution. However, Darwin's ideas were soon being applied to human groups and organisations. The shorthand term 'Darwinian' appeared very quickly after 1859 and was used in loose ways to refer to many different accounts of social development and progress. Some of these had little in common with Darwin's theory, other than the belief that biological concepts could be applied to human communities. By the late 1870s, the phrase 'social Darwinism' began to be heard and, in the following decades, 'Darwinism' was used to describe and justify a whole range of competing political and ideological positions.

The Descent of Man by Darwin



Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, is the first of Darwin's published works to contain the word 'evolution'. The first part of the book applies the theory of evolution to the human species, and the second looks at the role of sexual selection within the process of evolution.

Herbert Spencer and the survival of the fittest

Many Victorians recognised in evolutionary thinking a vision of the world that seemed to fit their own social experience. The scale of change during the 19th century, and the impact on people's lives of industrialisation, urbanisation and technological innovation, was unprecedented. The idea of a 'struggle for existence' that was central to Darwin's theory of

biological evolution was a powerful way to describe Britain's competitive capitalist economy in which some people became enormously wealthy and others struggled amidst the direst poverty.

Traditional liberal ideas valued the independence and autonomy of individuals and argued that, wherever possible, the state should adopt a 'laissez-faire' (or 'leave alone') position. Economically, too, markets should be allowed to operate freely, allowing wealth creation to flourish through competition. Evolution seemed to confirm this view: species compete and struggle and only some – the fittest and best – survive. In fact, Darwin was convinced that cooperation was also important, especially for those creatures, including humans, who live in groups. Others, though, were convinced that competition was the key to development.

The philosopher Herbert Spencer, who began to formulate his own evolutionary ideas before Darwin's work appeared, influentially made this argument. He believed that the fundamental physical laws of evolution mean that progress of all kinds depends on struggle and competition. Only some can survive this struggle, and to try to help the weak flies in the face of nature. Attempts to aid the weakest in society, such as improving the living and working conditions of the poorest people, was dangerously mistaken. It risked impeding the forces of evolutionary advance. Spencer coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest' to describe evolution, a phrase Darwin was persuaded to add to his own book only at a later date.

Evolution and Ethics

Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1893) proposed that Darwinian evolution need not be fully accepted, but could be managed, using population control, to the benefit of humanity.

Cooperation and mutual aid

This bleak vision of humanity struggling to survive was contested by alternative accounts that also claimed the 'Darwinian' tag. In a later work, *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin emphasised the powerful social instincts of group animals. Along with others, he saw that, far from diminishing a species' chances in evolutionary struggles, cooperation may improve their ability to survive. In 1902, a book appeared called *Mutual Aid*, which gave a convenient phrase to this notion that the greatest evolutionary advantage enjoyed by a species was its sociability. It was by the Russian scientist and philosopher, Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin was an anarchist and he, like Herbert Spencer, favoured a society in which the state played a minimal role. Unlike Spencer, though, Kropotkin believed that cooperation and harmony would be the natural result, not competition and extinction of the unfit.

Empire and racial science

Notions of competitiveness also often appeared in justifications of Britain's imperial ambitions. At the end of the 19th century there was fierce rivalry amongst European colonisers, who were keen to exploit mineral and other natural resources in Africa and to secure new areas for trade. Social Darwinists such as the mathematician, Karl Pearson, argued that indigenous populations unable to withstand the greater military and economic power of a colonising force must inevitably be pushed aside to make room for 'fitter' competitors.

This aggressive colonial competition at the end of the century drew support from supposedly

scientific and biological ideas about racial superiority and inferiority. Darwin's *Descent of Man* suggested a graduated evolutionary chain of development. It seemed to sanction ideas of 'primitive' peoples supposedly lower on the evolutionary scale than the white Europeans who were invariably presented as the model of evolved civilisation.

The 19th-century vogue for classification had resulted in theories arguing that human differences were so great as to suggest entirely different species of man. Georges Cuvier, the French naturalist and zoologist who helped establish the field of comparative anatomy, argued that all humans could be classified into a series of separate types. Similar 'polygenist' ideas were important for Robert Knox, whose 1850 book, *The Races of Man*, classified and evaluated all human beings according to their race, and insisted that race was the most important determining feature of behaviour and character. Arguments such as Knox's were used to support the retention of slavery in the southern states of America. However, *On the Origin of Species* in fact challenged racist thought. Darwin was horrified by slavery and his countering 'monogenist' view of the common descent of all humans in *On the Origin of Species* eventually came to prevail – although ideas about evolutionary 'superiority' and 'inferiority' did too.

The Races of Men: 19th century racial theory

Robert Knox's *The Races of Men* (1850) expressed the dominant view of the time in the West that race was a major determinant of culture, behaviour and character. Views such as those expressed in Knox's work were used to support slavery and anti-Semitism.

Heredity: gender, class and eugenics

Prior to evolutionary theory, inheritance commonly implied the passing on of wealth, land, name and status. By the end of the 19th century, however, inheritance was being understood as a biological matter. The theory of genetics had not yet been developed, but Darwin and others were constantly puzzling over how attributes could be passed from parents to offspring.

Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, began to study eminent families in the 1860s, arguing in *Hereditary Genius* (1869) that mental and physical ability – and even morality – is inherited. He was a pioneer of statistical methods and collected data on families. He began to believe that the forces of natural selection no longer worked efficiently in modern, advanced societies like Britain, precisely because 'civilisation' valued ideas that tended to protect citizens and improve their conditions. Natural selection thus needed to be replaced with what he described as 'rational selection'. Rational selection was central to what Galton termed the new science of 'eugenics', a term that means 'well born'. In Galton's view, skilled professionals must manage reproduction in order to ensure that the 'best' people have most offspring while the poor (or those referred to as the 'feeble-minded') should be discouraged or even prevented from having children.

Hereditary Genius, a 19th century theoretical basis for eugenics

Francis Galton, the author of *Hereditary Genius* (1869), was a cousin of Charles Darwin, and the first person to use the word 'eugenics'.

Conservatives, liberals and socialists all embraced eugenic ideas. Socialists such as the writers [H G Wells](#) and George Bernard Shaw were attracted to the notion that the state, rather than individuals, would be charged with the task of managing the development of population. Only the state was in a position to be able to do so with the greater good in mind, they believed. Eugenics also featured in debates about the position of women. Eugenic enthusiasts argued that the middle-class feminists who campaigned for women's access to education and employment opportunities were in fact being diverted from their most important role as child-bearers. Some women were hostile as a result, seeing eugenics as another justification for unequal and unfair treatment.

Others, however, saw eugenics as providing support for women's emancipation. Women must be well educated to make rational choices about marriage. They must not be burdened by social conventions or by economic necessity. By the 1890s, these ideas were being taken up amongst what were called 'New Women'. These women were modern and independent and, like the best-selling novelist, Sarah Grand, used fiction to upturn traditional marriage plots. Grand supported eugenic thinking, and her 'New Woman' heroines were prepared to deny love rather than risk having a child with an unsuitable husband. This 'New Woman' puts eugenic social duty before her own feelings and desires, proving as a consequence that she is fit to be man's equal.

So-called 'positive' eugenics tried to encourage middle-class women to have more children. 'Negative' eugenics, however, was targeted at the poor, and suggested policies to prevent them from having children. Many Victorians feared that while the birth rate was declining among what was believed to be the 'best' groups, the poorest continued to have large families. The latter were characterised as either 'feeble-minded' (a label that could include paupers, alcoholics and women on poor relief) or criminal. Large families meant these socially damaging traits were on the increase, some argued. Notions of biology and heredity were central to the work of figures like Cesare Lombroso, the Italian criminologist. Lombroso insisted that inherited bodily traits and abnormalities (even including the shape of ear-lobes) were reliable signs of an individual's propensity to crime. This version of eugenics targeted under-privileged groups of people, arguing they were unfit to have children.

Eugenic ideas continued to be hotly debated into the 20th century. However, attempts to pass legislation criminalising procreation among the 'feeble-minded' were eventually defeated. The traditions of individualism that had long been dominant in British political life perhaps had something to do with opposition to more extreme eugenic policies. Elsewhere, however, in Europe and the United States, aggressive policies were pursued, culminating in legislation passed by the Nazis in the 1930s that allowed for enforced sterilisation of those deemed 'unfit'. In the aftermath of the Second World War, as the full horror of the Nazi state's genocidal 'Final Solution' became known, eugenics became largely discredited.

The spectre of degeneration

Darwin's evolutionary ideas helped many Victorians to imagine a dynamic world of progress. It seemed to fit perfectly, for a period of time at least, an image of Britain at the forefront of an industrialised and wealthy modern world in which man had definitively tamed nature for his own ends. Towards the end of the 19th century, however, theories of evolution were the basis of fears of social, racial and cultural degeneration and decline. Evolution was countered by frightening examples of 'devolution'. Some of the most popular fiction of this period – including [Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*](#) (1886), Henry Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) and H G Wells's [The Time Machine](#) (1895) – explored scenarios of frightening devolution. Stevenson's erudite, gentlemanly and rather bored Jekyll turns into

the beastly Hyde, who is cruel, lustful and murderous. Hyde's squat, ape-like body, his dark, hairy hands, and his energy and appetite all signal his 'primitive' state.

Fears that modern European civilisation was on the brink of disaster and decline were, for some at least, given credence by the new literature and art. A German writer, Max Nordau, used scientific and evolutionary language to condemn much late 19th-century European music and writing. His book, *Degeneration*, translated in 1895, attacked a long list of writers, poets, dramatists, artists and composers, including [Oscar Wilde](#). Wilde's downfall from the height of his fame in the same year, when he was tried and imprisoned for 'gross indecency' seemed to illustrate Nordau's case.

All manner of biological arguments about degeneration were extended to debate about social and cultural life in the late 19th century, as major European societies were buffeted by volatile economic conditions. Degeneration became an influential idea and a favourite trope for writers. However, notions of degeneration did not supersede other evolutionary ideas, but became a part of the extraordinary imaginative resource that Darwin's theory – unwittingly, on his part – provided.