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# Social Darwinism in the Gilded Age

AP.USH: KC-6.3.1.A (KC), MIG (Theme),

Unit 6: Learning Objective G

The belief that white, wealthy, Anglo-Saxon Americans were biologically superior to other groups fueled many social and political trends of the Gilded Age.

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## Overview

- **Social Darwinism** is a term scholars use to describe the practice of misapplying the biological evolutionary language of Charles Darwin to politics, the economy, and society.
- Many Social Darwinists embraced *laissez-faire* capitalism and racism. They believed that government should not interfere in the “survival of the fittest” by helping the poor, and promoted the idea that some races are biologically superior to others.
- The ideas of Social Darwinism pervaded many aspects of American society in the **Gilded Age**,

including policies that affected immigration, imperialism, and public health.

## Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is one of the most important books in the annals of both science and history. In *Origin* and in his subsequent writing Darwin offered a revolutionary scientific theory: the process of **evolution through natural selection**.<sup>1</sup>

In short, **natural selection** means that plants and animals evolve over time in nature as new species arise from spontaneous mutations at the point of reproduction and battle with other plants and animals to get food, avoid being killed, and have offspring. Darwin pointed to fossil records, among other evidence, in support of his theory.

## Social Darwinism

Soon, some sociologists and others were taking up words and ideas which Darwin had used to describe the biological world, and they were adopting them to their own ideas and theories about the human social world. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these **Social Darwinists** took up the language of evolution to frame an understanding of the



growing gulf between the rich and the poor as well as the many differences between cultures all over the world.



Herbert Spencer. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The explanation they arrived at was that businessmen and others who were economically



and socially successful were so because they were biologically and socially “naturally” the fittest. Conversely, they reasoned that the poor were “naturally” weak and unfit and it would be an error to allow the weak of the species to continue to breed. They believed that the dictum “survival of the fittest” (a term coined not by Charles Darwin but by sociologist Herbert Spencer) meant that *only* the fittest should survive.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Darwin, these sociologists and others were not biologists. They were adapting and corrupting Darwin’s language for their own social, economic, and political explanations. While Darwin’s theory remains a cornerstone of modern biology to this day, the views of the Social Darwinists are no longer accepted, as they were based on an erroneous interpretation of the theory of evolution.

## **Social Darwinism, poverty, and eugenics**

Social Darwinian language like this extended into theories of race and racism, eugenics, the claimed national superiority of one people over another, and immigration law.

Many sociologists and political theorists turned to Social Darwinism to argue against government programs to aid the poor, as they believed that poverty was the result of natural inferiority, which

should be bred out of the human population. Herbert Spencer gave as an example a young woman from upstate New York named Margaret, whom he described as a “gutter-child.” Because government aid had kept her alive, Margaret had, as Spencer wrote, “proved to be the prolific mother” of two hundred descendants who were “idiots, imbeciles, drunkards, lunatics, paupers, and prostitutes.” Spencer concluded by asking, “Was it kindness or cruelty which, generation after generation, enabled these to multiply and become an increasing curse to the society around them?”<sup>3</sup>

These ideas inspired the eugenics movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which sought to improve the health and intelligence of the human race by sterilizing individuals it deemed “feeble-minded” or otherwise “unfit.” Eugenic sterilizations, which disproportionately targeted women, minorities, and immigrants, continued in the United States until the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

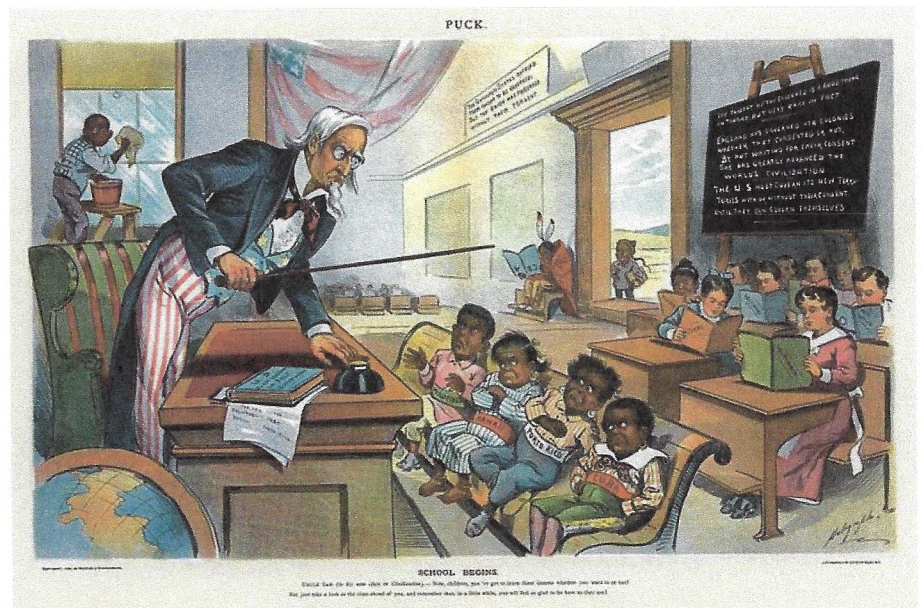
## **Social Darwinism, immigration, and imperialism**

The pernicious beliefs of Social Darwinism also shaped Americans' relationship with peoples of other nations. As a massive number of immigrants came to the United States during the Second Industrial Revolution, white, Anglo-Saxon Americans viewed these newcomers—who differed



from earlier immigrants in that they were less likely to speak English and more likely to be Catholic or Jewish rather than Protestant—with disdain. Many whites believed that these **new immigrants**, who hailed from Eastern or Southern Europe, were racially inferior and consequently "less evolved" than immigrants from England, Ireland, or Germany.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Social Darwinism was used as a justification for American imperialism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines following the **Spanish-American War**, as many adherents of imperialism argued that it was the duty of white Americans to bring civilization to "backwards" peoples.



Political cartoon showing Uncle Sam lecturing a group of childlike caricatures depicting the people of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The "more advanced students" of Texas, California and Alaska sit in the back of the classroom, while the African American student is forced to clean the windows, the Native American student is confined to a corner, and the Chinese student is halted outside the door.

Art by Louis Dalrymple, *Puck* magazine, 1899. [Image](#) courtesy Library of Congress.

During and after [World War II](#), the arguments of Social Darwinists and eugenicists lost popularity in the United States due to their association with Nazi racial propaganda. Modern biological science has completely discredited the theory of Social Darwinism.

## What do you think?

Describe Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in your own words. How does it differ from Herbert Spencer's idea of Social Darwinism?

How did the ideas of Social Darwinism influence politics and society in the Gilded Age?

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### Notes

1. See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859).
2. For more on Social Darwinism see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: University of

Pennsylvania Press, 1944); Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

3. Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981), 110.
4. For more on eugenics in the United States, see Paul A. Lombardo, *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
5. See Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).