

## Why were later 19<sup>th</sup> century social thinkers attracted to the idea of 'evolution'?

The idea of evolution had two broad attractions for social thinkers, one concerning its intellectual history, and the other concerning the political and social implications of its conclusions. In the former category, evolution provided the relatively new subject of sociology with a way to 'find its feet', while lending the factually-based credibility of the natural sciences to social science. As for the specific conclusions which social thinkers drew from the concept of 'evolution', the biological conclusions of Darwin were used - in the guise of 'Social Darwinism' - to justify both empire-building and a lack of provision for the poor.

It is worth beginning with an definition of what Darwin and Spencer understood as 'evolution', as it differs from the way in which we think about evolution now. Most theories of evolution at the time stemmed from Lamarck, who had arrived at some tentative conclusions many years before *The Origin of Species* was published. Lamarck dismissed the concept of what we now know as genetics, and believed instead that characteristics acquired by organisms during their lives would be passed on to their offspring. This argument, which in the light of modern study seems rather ridiculous, suggested for example that a blacksmith's muscles would be passed on to his children, or that an animal which was blinded in an accident before procreation would produce blind offspring. Spencer continued to believe in this philosophy throughout his life, and drew some further conclusions which, with the improved knowledge of evolution that we now have, seem fallacious. He equated the development of an organism during its lifetime with the development of different types of organism through the ages, and paralleled this by equating the development of individual societies to the general succession of society. This philosophy falls apart if Lamarck's conclusion no longer holds, as the changes we make to ourselves as individuals during our lifetimes cannot be passed on to our children - what we do pass on is determined solely by our genetic makeup. It also seems slightly presumptuous to jump directly from a theory about individual organisms to one about complex societies. Spencer's conclusions are generally ignored today: while popular at the time, with the limited knowledge of evolution that the Victorians had available to them, the theories seem unsophisticated in the light of 20<sup>th</sup> century biology. However, trying to discover why the theories were so popular can give us a better understanding of Victorian society.

The general intellectual climate into which the concept of 'evolution' was thrown was one of increasingly entrenched rationalisation in the social sciences - there was a respect for the methodological nature of the natural sciences, which had already made a major impact on economics and was beginning to pervade anthropology and psychology too. In order to be taken seriously as an academic subject, it was necessary for sociology to adopt such positivist methods as well, and the association of sociology with biology could only add to its credibility. Secondly, evolution developed when utilitarianism - up until then the most prevalent strand of positivist philosophy - was beginning to flounder. According to Burrow, 'the aspiration to create a science of morals and legislation, the central ambition of social thinking of a positivist complexion since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was incarnated in utilitarianism'. Evolutionary sociology became its successor. Morton White talks of a 'revolt against formalism' as defined by the old philosophers, and the adoption of a more pragmatic point of view. Burrow claims that 'the tension between the romantic-historical and the positivist approaches to society could only be reconciled, for the Victorians, by some theory of social evolution'. Evolution also came to the fore at a time of concentration on social change, rather than coherence and stability, which made the acceptance of a science with such profound implications for society so much easier. One aspect of this social change was widespread university reform in Britain and, even more so, in the United States, where Cornell University had just been founded in the reformist tradition, and Harvard had appointed a reforming Provost. This ensured that despite the potentially disastrous effects of the theory on organised religion, it was still able to gain academic credibility and become accepted as fact by the majority: as Adams said, 'Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased everyone, except curates and bishops. It was the very best substitute for religion: a safe, conservative, practical, thoroughly Common-Law deity.' Evolutionary positivism (in the style of Spencer) became, according to Burrow, 'strongly entrenched in society as the orthodox view'.

Sociology itself was a relatively new academic subject in its own right, and was struggling to 'find its feet'. As Hunt said, 'we are as yet groping in the dark, and know not yet what to study, or hardly what facts we want to get, to found our science'. It needed a 'big idea' like evolution to latch onto, and this helps to explain the excesses of social thinkers such as Spencer in comparing biological progression to advances in society. For Spencer, science and religion could only be reconciled by a clear

demarcation between the knowable and the unknowable. He was against the belief in an interventionist (creation-based) rather than causal (evolutionary) account of human development, believing instead that the complete causal chain was in the realm of the knowable. This, according to Hawthorn, 'consigned the Unknowable to first place in a scientifically accessible causal chain'. Spencer, in trying to discover this causal chain, seems to have pretensions of omniscience, treating Darwinism as a universal panacea for society. 'Evolution' to Spencer was not just a biological principle but an abstract philosophical one: he defined it as 'the integration of matter and the concomitant disruption of motion', which could be applied just as easily to social development of communities as to inheritance among individuals. Evolution was seen as being driven by the 'persistence of force' - homogeneity is a disequilibrium, and the 'force' to which Spencer referred made matter increasingly heterogeneous, so primitive organisms became many separate species, and primitive societies developed into complex industrial ones with a high division of labour. Ogburn talks of a 'social evolution' driven not by variation, natural selection and heredity' but by 'invention, exponential accumulation, diffusion and adjustment'. This is refined by Ward, who sees a need for a distinction between the 'genetic' (what man had inherited through a Lamarckian process) and the 'teleological' (what man, educated in evolution, could make of himself). The onward march of evolutionary social theory did not stop with the causal chain up to the present either; it was seen by some as an accurate predictor of the future. According to Lubbock, 'Utopia ... turns out to be the necessary consequence of natural laws'. The popularity of Darwinism appeared to be largely due to its seemingly limitless extensibility into grand unified theories of biology, anthropology, sociology and even politics.

Two particular political ideas seem to arise from evolution theory, and it is useful to investigate how the theory contributed to their acceptance by society. This 'social Darwinism' is only a subspecies of the entire intellectual movement of evolutionary sociology, but is both the most prescriptive and the most controversial. Firstly, Victorian society was deeply concerned with the problem of the poor. The intellectuals, generally well-off at a time of as yet unrivalled middle-class prosperity, found the continued existence of workhouses and genuine urban poverty rather embarrassing, and were hunting for solutions. In Britain, Galton and Pearson accepted Spencer as a convenient excuse for not helping the poor - 'give educational facilities to all, give a minimum wage with free medical advice and ... you will find that the unemployables, the degenerates and the physical and mental

weaklings increase rather than decrease'. This is based on the rather disturbing notion that those who are poor are so not because of any failing of the state, but because *as individuals* they are simply not of sufficient 'quality' to succeed. Galton and Pearson claim again that 'The quality of a society is lowered morally and intellectually by artificially preserving those who are least able to take care of themselves and to behave well'. The message seems simple: let the poor die out before they can breed, and leave society with only the rich. However, Spencer did not believe this would happen in reality; instead he believed that the infinite malleability of human beings meant that if some people were forced to cope with difficult situations then coping strategies would develop, these would have positive results in inheritance, and this would be beneficial all round. If state assistance for the poor was provided, these coping strategies would never develop. In the USA, Spencer himself appealed to the American desire to accept inequality and their inherent dislike of the state which he, as a nonconformist, had shared for many years. He claimed that evolution had 'rescued social science from the dominion of cranks, and offered a definite and magnificent field to work, from which we might hope at last to derive definite results for the solution of social problems'. The solutions proposed by Galton and Pearson above suggest that any solution based on evolutionary theory will claim that inequality is not just inevitable and pre-destined but also the mark of freedom - Spencer sees an order in the universe that should be revered in its own right, and believes that human beings are not competent to interfere.

The other great concern to certain Victorian intellectuals was how to justify the expansion of the British Empire. Evolution seemed to provide some answers. It suggested that the Victorian English could predict the future of 'backward' societies by seeing what had happened to their own - that such societies in other parts of the world were simply a few stages lower than Britain on the evolutionary ladder, leading not to tolerance of global diversity but an arrogant belief in the innate superiority of the British people. Lubbock said that 'the future happiness of our race' depended on continuing to evolve, and the struggle inherent in evolution could be represented by the struggle between coloniser and colony. Darwinism saw man as part of nature, not outside it, thus scientifically exposing man's instincts for animal-like behaviour, and the philosophy of 'survival of the fittest' was applied to struggles between nations as much as it was to struggles between the rich and the poor as described above. Separating Spencer's biology from his politics is virtually impossible; he considered

them to be as one. In his obituary *The Times* claimed that he had 'systematized the modern theory of evolution and vindicated it as a universal principle of thought'.

The general subject of evolution proved so popular to late 19<sup>th</sup> century social thinkers because it developed in a welcoming environment of reform and natural-scientific rationality in academia, while attempting to give some credibility to the new subject of sociology by answering age-old questions from a number of other disciplines. The conclusions drawn from the theory were also popular among academics, appearing to justify both the withdrawal of support for the poor and the continuation of colonial expansion. MacRae's conclusion is perhaps the most appropriate response here, making the acute point that although in biology Darwinism is useful as a theory, in sociology the principle might just 'explain too much' - it can be applied to so many different situations where it either does not hold water or is simply unpalatable.