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Origins of the myth of social Darwinism: The ambiguous legacy of Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*

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ABSTRACT

The term "social Darwinism" owes its currency and many of its connotations to Richard Hofstadter's influential *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (SDAT). The post-SDAT meanings of "social Darwinism" are the product of an unresolved Whiggish tension in SDAT: Hofstadter championed economic reform over free markets, but he also condemned biology in social science, this while many progressive social scientists surveyed in SDAT offered biological justifications for economic reform. As a consequence, there are, in effect, two Hofstadters in SDAT. The first (call him Hofstadter₁) disparaged as "social Darwinism" biological justification of laissez-faire, for this was, in his view, doubly wrong. The second Hofstadter (call him Hofstadter₂) documented, however incompletely, the underside of progressive reform: racism, eugenics and imperialism, and even devised a term for it, "Darwinian collectivism." This essay documents and explains Hofstadter's ambivalence in SDAT, especially where, as with Progressive Era eugenics, the "two Hofstadters" were at odds with each other. It explores the historiographic and semantic consequences of Hofstadter's ambivalence, including its connection with the Left's longstanding mistrust of Darwinism as apology for Malthusian political economy.

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1. Introduction

Political economy and biology are trading partners of long standing. Charles Darwin wrote frequently of the economy of nature, and he famously acknowledged the influence of T.R. Malthus' *Essay on Population* upon his formative thinking, as did the co-founder of the theory of evolution by natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace. Theories of organic evolution have long attracted economists.¹

Evolutionary ideas were especially widespread among Progressive Era social scientists. Veblen (1899), for example, proposed that economics be reconstructed upon Darwinian principles. Marshall, whose *Principles* frontispiece recorded the same motto found in *The Origin of Species* (1859), *natura non facit saltum*, opined that "the Mecca of the economist lies in evolutionary biology" (1920, p. 19).² Writing in 1894, Wharton School reformer Simon Patten said: "The great scientific victories of the nineteenth century lie in the field of biology.... We are closing this century with as definite a bias in favor of biologic reasoning and analogy as the last century closed with a similar bias in favor of the method of reasoning used in physics and astronomy" (1894, p. 68). Moreover, a *Who's Who* of Progressive Era political economy appealed to eugenics (planned social control of human heredity) to justify the economic reform legislation so characteristic of the time (Leonard, 2003).

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¹ See Geoffrey Hodgson's introductory essay and the papers he has gathered in *The Foundations of Evolutionary Economics, 1890–1973* (1998).

² On the use of biology analogies in Marshall, see Niman (1991).

Today Darwinism enjoys enormous prestige and influence, arguably more than at any time since the publication of the *Origin of Species*, yet social Darwinism, in marked contrast, today functions as an omnibus term of abuse, enough that essentially no one has ever self-applied the term.

This essay inquires into the implied historical puzzle: how is it that “social Darwinism,” which should refer neutrally to the application of Darwinian ideas to society, has instead come to be an indictment? Moreover, if social Darwinism is, as everyone knows, a Bad Thing (Bannister, 1988, p. 3), what manner of Bad Thing?³ How, in particular, did “social Darwinism” come to denote free-market opposition, especially that of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, to progressive reform, the planned state intervention into economy and society?

This essay will argue that “social Darwinism” owes both its contemporary currency and its association with laissez-faire to Hofstadter's (1944) brilliant and influential first book, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (SDAT). Hofstadter's first take on Progressive Era reform was, as he later admitted, refracted through a New Deal liberal's conception of reform (Foner, 1992, p. xxii), one that did not share the biologically rooted enthusiasms—eugenics, scientific racism and race-conscious imperialism—of the Progressive Era reformers who are the primary focus of Hofstadter's book. The post-Hofstadter meaning of “social Darwinism” is, in part, the product of an unresolved Whiggish tension in SDAT: Hofstadter transparently championed state-guided progressive reform, what he called “meliorism,” but he also condemned biology in social science, this while leading Progressive Era progressives championed both.

As a consequence, one finds in SDAT an incipient ambivalence toward Progressive Era reformers, whose reformism Hofstadter applauds, but whose sometime support for eugenics, racism and imperialism, he rejects. There are, in effect, two Hofstadters present in SDAT. The first (call him Hofstadter₁) can safely disparage biological justification of laissez-faire, for this was, in his view, doubly wrong. It is this Hofstadter who attached the epithet “social Darwinism” to biological justification of free markets and who offered an account that, as Bellomy (1984, p. 27) put it, depicted “heroic liberals snatching helpless social science from the clutches of vile Social Darwinists.”

But SDAT, however much it caricatured the free-market economics of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, also documented the influence of Darwinian and other evolutionary ideas upon some of those “heroic liberals”, the progressives who led the assault upon free-market economics. The second Hofstadter (call him Hofstadter₂) documented, however incompletely, the underside of progressive reform: racism, eugenics and imperialism. Hofstadter₂ even distinguished what he called “collectivist Darwinism” from the “individualist Darwinism” of Spencer and Sumner, and concluded that, “intrinsically, [Darwinism] was a neutral instrument, capable of supporting opposite ideologies” (1944, p. 174). “If there were, in Darwin's writings, texts for rugged individualists,” wrote Hofstadter₂, “those who stood for social solidarity and fraternity could, however, match them text for text with some to spare” (1944, p. 74).

Hofstadter in 1944 preferred planning to laissez-faire and he preferred cultural to biological explanations in social science. When planning was itself biological, as it was with Progressive Era eugenics, for example, the two Hofstadters were at odds with each other, with consequences for the future fortunes of the term “social Darwinism.” This essay argues for Hofstadter's ambivalence (by personifying the two Hofstadters) in SDAT, and explores its consequences, including, lastly, its connection with the Left's longstanding mistrust of Darwinism as apology for Malthusian political economy.

2. The Whiggish tension in SDAT

Richard Hofstadter, like many New York intellectuals in the 1930s, embraced radical reform. He joined Columbia University's Communist Party unit for a brief period in 1938. The more mature Hofstadter grew disenchanted with radical politics, indeed came to see it as hostile to scholarship, but SDAT, which revised his doctoral dissertation published in 1939, preserves Hofstadter's earlier world view, that of a precocious scholar, still much influenced by his mentors, Merle Curti and Charles Beard, who could say to close friends, “I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it” (Foner, 1992, p. xi). SDAT also bears the historiographic imprint of Beard's “rule” that historical interpretation must assume that “changes in the structure of social ideas wait on general changes in economic and social life” (1944, p. 176). SDAT is thus sprinkled with unadorned Beardian claims, such as “Herbert Spencer and his philosophy were products of English Industrialism” (1944, p. 22).

Time did not much soften Hofstadter's hostility to free markets. In *The Age of Reform* (1955, p. 18) Hofstadter maintained that “the American system . . . at times and in places was a jungle.” The young Hofstadter, who began under Curti's supervision in 1939, wrote as a garden-variety 1930s American intellectual of the liberal/Left. His hostility to Progressive Era defenders of competitive individualism was a given in his intellectual milieu, transparent even to sympathetic reviewers. One friendly review noted that “Dr. Hofstadter's own sympathies are not hard to divine: he is hostile to laissez-faire, to Spencerian sociology, to classical economics” (D.W.B., 1946, p. 124). Eric Foner, Hofstadter student and successor in his chair at Columbia, was equally plain in his introduction to the book's 1992 printing: “Hofstadter makes no effort to disguise his distaste for the social Darwinists or his sympathy for the critics, especially the sociologists and philosophers who believed intellectuals could guide intellectual progress (a view extremely congenial to Hofstadter at the time he was writing)” (p. xv). The Hofstadter of SDAT wrote as an opponent of laissez-faire and also as a champion of what he took to be its rightful successor, planned, expert-led reform. But Hofstadter's view of the Progressive Era reformers, whose opposition to laissez faire he had celebrated in SDAT, darkened over time, moving ever farther from the near-hagiographic portraits offered by other historians of American

³ Bannister, a leading revisionist of Hofstadter, is using “Bad Thing” ironically.

thought such as Curti and Henry Steele Commager. A decade after SDAT, Hofstadter could say plainly that “the progressive movement had an ambiguous character” and that “somewhere along the way, a large part of the Populist-Progressive tradition has turned sour, become illiberal and ill-tempered” (1955, pp. 18, 20). The Hofstadter of *The Age of Reform* distanced mid-century American reform from its Progressive Era antecedents. “The Spirit of the progressive era was quite different from that of the New Deal,” he wrote (1955, p. 20). It could even be said that, the more mature Hofstadter suggested, “hatred of Europe and Europeans, racial, religious, and nativist phobias . . . all these have been found not only in opposition to reform but at times oddly combined with it” (1955, pp. 20–21).⁴

The New Deal liberals shared with their progressive ancestors opposition to free-market economics, but as the more mature Hofstadter argued, Progressive Era reform differed importantly from New Deal reform. New Deal liberals, unlike the progressives, were not hostile to machine politicians and instead formed alliances with them. The “German model” of progressive reform, Bismarckian social welfarism, was, after WWI, untenable politically, and the Left abandoned Germany for a new exemplar, the Soviet Union. New Deal liberals also abandoned the progressive ethos of human improvement and its distinctly moralizing language. Most important of all for our purposes, New Deal liberalism in the early years of the Second World War would no longer easily accommodate the biologically grounded thought, such as eugenics, scientific racism and race-inspired imperialism, that some leading progressives championed in the Progressive Era.

Reform attitudes toward biology in social science experienced a sea change in the 40 years that separated Theodore Roosevelt’s election to the presidency and the publication of SDAT. The decline of American eugenics in the 1930s and 1940s was only one part of the increasing hostility, especially on the political Left, to the use of biology more generally in the social sciences.⁵ The upshot was that Hofstadter believed, like many others circa 1941, that biological explanations of human action and human society were illegitimate and dangerous. Going even further than Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas, who had argued that culture more than nature determined the shape of humanity and society, Hofstadter argued that biology was irrelevant to human social life (1944, p. 176). SDAT’s ringing peroration condemned “such biological ideas as ‘survival of the fittest’” as being of “doubtful value in natural science,” and as being “utterly useless in attempting to understand society” (1944, p. 176). For the idea that biology alone explained human action, what Hofstadter condemned as biological determinism, he proposed to substitute the opposite extreme, cultural determinism, the idea that biology has nothing to do with human action.

Hofstadter’s (1944) New Deal left-liberal sensibility thus contained two intellectual posits: first, that state-planned reform was socially, economically and ethically better than free markets, and second, that biological, especially Darwinian explanations of human society were illegitimate and dangerous.⁶ But this reform-good-biology-bad trope, while characteristic of Hofstadter’s mid-20th century American liberalism, does not map upon the Gilded Age and Progressive Era analyzed in SDAT.⁷ In particular, it ill-suited the progressive scholars who were the real focus of SDAT and who were happy to harness biological (including Darwinian) arguments for their various reform ends. In fact, the Progressive Era progressives Hofstadter most admired (men like Lester F. Ward, Edward A. Ross, Thorstein Veblen, Charles Horton Cooley, and John R. Commons) were enthusiastic biologists.

These two aspects of the more mature Hofstadter’s thought, contempt for free-market economics but skepticism regarding the biological explanations of progressives who would substitute expert planning for free markets, are both present in SDAT. However, Hofstadter₁’s contempt for free markets was far more developed than Hofstadter₂’s still incipient skepticism regarding progressivism, an asymmetry that had consequences for the subsequent fate of “social Darwinism” in social science.

3. Social Darwinism and “social Darwinism”

Hofstadter declared American social Darwinism dead no later than 1918: “as a conscious social philosophy,” Hofstadter said, “social Darwinism had disappeared in America at the end of the war” (1944, p. 175). It is an irony, then, that the term “social Darwinism” gained meaningful currency only with the book that declared the concept long dead. Historians revising Hofstadter have established that both the term “social Darwinism” and the concept of social Darwinism are unexpectedly rare in the 1860–1915 period surveyed by SDAT.

⁴ “One of the most interesting and least studied aspects of American life,” Hofstadter continued, “has been the frequent recurrence of the demand for reforms . . . combined with the choice of hatred as a kind of creed” (1955, p. 21).

⁵ Hodgson (2004), for example, singles out Talcott Parsons as especially influential in purging American sociology, long informed by biology, of its biological orientation. In keeping with the tradition of using “social Darwinism” as an epithet, Parsons used “social Darwinism” to disparage any uses of biology in sociology, Darwinian or other.

⁶ “The tradition of Progressive reform is the one upon which I was reared,” said Hofstadter in 1955, “and upon which my political sentiments were formed, as is indeed the tradition of most intellectuals in America” (1955, p. 21).

⁷ Hofstadter treated social Darwinism as “a phase in the history of conservative thought,” but his exemplary social Darwinists, Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, were classical liberals, not conservatives. Spencer was considered dangerously radical in the early postbellum years. Before the Progressive Era professionalization of American economics, Spencer’s anticlerical and antideistic stances were quite controversial in American colleges, which were institutionally Christian and where clerics taught political economy. This was especially true at Yale, where Sumner’s introduction into the curriculum of Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* was opposed by President Noah Porter. Sumner challenged Porter on grounds of academic freedom (see Barber, 1988, pp. 147–151).

First, the term “social Darwinism.”⁸ Bannister (1988) and Bellomy (1984) established that “social Darwinism” was all but unknown to English-speaking readers before the Progressive Era. Hodgson’s (2004) bibliometric analysis identified a mere eleven instances of “social Darwinism” in the Anglophone literature (as represented by the JSTOR database) before 1916.⁹ Before 1916 “social Darwinism” had almost no currency whatsoever, so it was, essentially, an anachronism as used by Hofstadter in SDAT.

“Social Darwinism” did not acquire much greater currency between 1916 and 1943; a mere 49 articles and reviews employ the term.¹⁰ Following the publication of SDAT, however, “social Darwinism” goes from obscure to commonplace: there are 4258 citations from 1944 to the present.¹¹

The fact that *social Darwinism* is anachronistic when applied to the pre-1916 period does not prove, of course, that the substance SDAT meant to characterize did not exist, but anachronism should put us on our guard, and Hofstadter’s revisionists, most prominently Bannister (1973, 1988), have persuasively argued that, SDAT notwithstanding, Darwinist defenses of laissez-faire were, like the term “social Darwinism” itself, quite uncommon in the American Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

As Bannister (1988) and Bellomy (1984) detail, “social Darwinism” had Continental not Anglo-American origins, and, its convoluted semantic history notwithstanding, more commonly referred to competition among groups (nations or races) than to competition among individuals within a group. The rare uses of “social Darwinism” before SDAT ordinarily referred to the uses of biology to defend militarism and war. Importantly, “social Darwinism” was applied to Spencer only twice before SDAT, and the first use of the term to describe Sumner appears in Hofstadter’s 1941 publication “William Graham Sumner: Social Darwinist.” In short, though the epithet “social Darwinist” is today more closely associated with Sumner and Spencer than with any other writers, that association was all but non-existent before Hofstadter published SDAT (Hodgson, 2004, pp. 447–448).

“Social Darwinism” had always been an epithet. From its very beginnings, reminds Bellomy (1984, p. 2), “social Darwinism” has been “heavily polemical, reserved for ideas with which a writer disagreed.” In SDAT Hofstadter continued the tradition of deploying “social Darwinism” to disparage, but, as Bellomy pointed out, “historians have not always disliked the same things” (1984, p. 2). Hofstadter, an American liberal writing at Columbia University during the nadir of American capitalism, disliked laissez-faire, and he disliked biological explanations of human action. In Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner he found two men who seemed to epitomize *both* aspects of what Hofstadter most disliked.

4. Indicting free-market economics as “social Darwinism”

Hofstadter argued in SDAT that American businessmen found in Darwin a convenient defense for their defenses of free markets. “Successful business entrepreneurs,” said Hofstadter, “seemed to have accepted almost by instinct the Darwinian terminology which had emerged from the conditions of their existence” (1944, p. 30). But American businessmen who invoked Darwin to defend the Gilded Age economic order were, it turns out, scarcer than hen’s teeth (Wyllie, 1959). Many businessmen were prepared to oppose reform and to justify laissez-faire, but their defenses of laissez-faire much more commonly invoked religion, the common good, Horatio Alger mythology, the American republican tradition, and even, if less frequently, classical political economy. As historian Wilson (1967, p. 93) put it, “It is true that in the last half of the 19th century great numbers of Americans were ideologically committed to the notions of competition, meritocracy and deserved success. But it is not true that this commitment was grounded on Darwinian premises. No more than a small handful of American business leaders or intellectuals were ‘social Darwinists’ in any sense precise enough to have a useful meaning.”

Darwinian defenses of laissez-faire among scholars, who were more likely to have read Darwin, are not much easier to find. Bannister and other revisionists point out that even Hofstadter’s social Darwinist exemplars Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner were not especially Darwinist. Spencer certainly invoked the evolutionary advantages of competition among men, and his extraordinary intellectual prominence in the last third of the 19th century also made him a large target for reform scholars. But Spencer would have rejected the label of “Darwinist,” in part because his own theory of evolution differed from and was published before Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (Spencer, 1852). The catch-phrase “survival of the fittest” was Spencer’s, and Darwin did not adopt it as a synonym for “natural selection” until Alfred Russel Wallace convinced him to do so in the fifth edition of the *Origin* (1869).

Importantly, Spencer was a Lamarckian with respect to human inheritance. He imagined that competition induced human beings to adapt themselves actively to their environments, improving their mental and physical skills, improved

⁸ Scholars have located the first appearance of the term “social Darwinism” in an 1879 article in *Popular Science* by Oscar Schmidt (Bellomy, 1984; Bannister, 1988; Crook, 1996; Hodgson, 2004). I have identified an 1877 use of the term by Joseph Fisher in “A History of Landholding in Ireland,” published in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. Future scholars will no doubt unearth still earlier citations.

⁹ These few citations of *social Darwinism* (and also “social Darwinian” and “social Darwinist” and plural forms) are out of a search space containing over 203,000 articles and reviews. Nor is it a question of the currency of “Darwinism.” If we remove only the modifier “social,” and then perform the identical search, JSTOR produces 1188 instances of “Darwinism” (and “Darwinian” and “Darwinist”), the earliest example being used in 1863 in a review of Thomas Henry Huxley’s *Man’s Place in Nature*.

¹⁰ Of 53 cites, one is a duplicate and two are notices of Hofstadter’s dissertation. Another is Hofstadter’s “William Graham Sumner, Social Darwinist,” which later appeared as a chapter in SDAT. There were but 29 articles published using *social Darwinism* (and like forms) from 1916 to 1943, one of them by Hofstadter, or about one citation per year. The JSTOR search space of articles and books for 1916–1943 was over 216,000.

¹¹ As of 31 May 2007. The search space for 1944 to 31 May 2007 comprised 2,475,225 articles and reviews.

traits that would then be inherited by their descendants. Spencer's view was that, in the struggle for existence, self-improvement came from conscious, planned exertion, not from the chance variation and natural selection that are the heart of Darwinism.¹² As a result, evolution is progressive in Spencer, whereas, for Darwin, at least the early Darwin, evolution means only non-teleological change. Spencer's fundamental belief in human progress via Lamarckian bootstrapping was at odds with Darwinian natural selection's randomness and its openness to non-progressive change.

Spencer, in fact, was not just a Lamarckian, he was a leading Lamarckian, taking up cudgels against the neo-Darwinians such as biologist August Weismann, whose watershed finding in 1889, that mice with their tails cut off do not bear short-tailed progeny, was seen by many as a crucial-experiment refutation of Lamarckism. Spencer's status as a defender of Lamarckism in the 1890s was such that that progressive Lamarckians, such as Lester Frank Ward, often found themselves in the awkward of position defending Spencer, a man whose individualism and laissez-faire economics they loathed (Degler, 1991, p. 22).

Sumner, like Spencer, was a strenuous advocate of individualism and economic competition. But, also like Spencer, he never used the term "social Darwinism" in all his writings, and Darwin figures surprisingly rarely in Sumner's oeuvre. One can find Sumner defending millionaires as the product of natural selection, for example, but Sumner's laissez-faire pronouncements are only patchily upholstered with Darwinian sentiments (Bannister, 1973). Hodgson (2004, p. 432) reports that in his most important treatise, *Folkways* (1906), Sumner mentioned Darwin only once.¹³ Sumner's student and executor, Albert Galloway Keller, lamented that his teacher "did not give much attention to the possibility of extending evolution into the societal field" (cited in Hodgson, 2004, p. 432).

Sumner was a self-styled defender of the common (or "forgotten") man: he regarded not just socialism but also plutocracy as an evil. Socialism and plutocracy were, for Sumner, equally bad forms of social control. It was Sumner's hostility to plutocracy that lead him to attack the Republican Party in 1909, accusing it of acquiring "the character of a conspiracy to hold power and to use it for plutocratic ends" (Sumner, 1911a, p. 160). Writing a new introduction to SDAT in 1959, Hofstadter, whose SDAT framing of Sumner as conservative could not accommodate Sumner's opposition to the Republican status quo, can offer only a witticism: "we may wonder whether in the entire history of thought, there ever was a conservativ[e] so utterly progressive as this" (Hofstadter, 1992, p. 8).

Sumner also demonstrated his laissez-faire bona fides when he opposed the tariff, a decidedly non-conservative apostasy (Bannister, 1973). Sumner was an advocate for laissez-faire, not for industry, and when industry benefited from policies opposed to laissez-faire, such as the tariff, Sumner was their enemy. The point here is obvious, but often lost in the stark dichotomies of Progressive Era historiography: not all departures from laissez-faire will serve the cause of progressive reform; indeed, they can work to entrench the status quo that reform seeks to change.

Howard Kaye, a careful scholar of social Darwinism, summarizes the historiography that revises Hofstadter: "a close reading of the theories of Sumner and Spencer exonerates them from the century-old charge of social Darwinism in the strictest sense of the term. They themselves did not advocate the application of Darwin's theory of natural selection, 'the law of the jungle,' to human society" (Kaye, 1986, pp. 33–34).

So what are Spencer and Sumner doing in a volume entitled "Social Darwinism in American Thought"? The answer, of course, is that Hofstadter is using "social Darwinist" in the traditional way: as an epithet to discredit views he opposed. What is new in the Anglophone literature is Hofstadter's applying the term to free-market economics.

Hofstadter put Spencer and Sumner in the dock less for their putative use of Darwinian ideas than for their defense of economic competition and individualism. As much as Hofstadter rejected biological ideas in social thought, his primary quarrel was with competitive individualism, a position he never abandoned, however much his views of progressivism darkened over time. Like the progressives who had vilified Spencer and Sumner, Hofstadter judged the American Gilded Age economic order a jungle and therefore judged any defense of it as "Darwinist," whatever its particulars.

As Bannister has argued, the emotional power of the epithet "social Darwinist" comes less from the theoretical claim that the alleged social Darwinist has misappropriated Darwinism (i.e., has got Darwin wrong) than it does from the charge that the alleged social Darwinist has wrongly apologized for power and privilege (1988, p. xvii), where, in the Gilded Age, power and privilege were assumed to reside with the plutocratic captains of industry and not (yet) with the captains of the ship of state.

5. Hofstadter₁: free markets versus the managed society

That even Hofstadter's social Darwinist exemplars fail to be especially Darwinist has led some scholars to suggest that a more accurate term for what Hofstadter meant to describe is "social Spencerism" (Ruse, 1980), that is, the view that the state should not intervene in markets, but should let "nature" take its course. Several of SDAT's first reviewers recognized this aspect of SDAT: Hofstadter's social Darwinism, wrote Harold Larrabee in *Ethics*, "is perhaps seven-tenths Herbert Spencerism" (1946, p. 151). A reviewer identified as "D.W.B" wrote "it is less Darwinism than Spencerism that is the theme" (1946, p. 123).

Part of the interpretative difficulty is that Hofstadter himself was unclear on what he meant by "social Darwinism," a term with little currency before 1944. In the preface, he staked out a very general definition: "the adaptation of Darwinism and related biological concepts to social ideologies" (1944, p. vii). Later in the text, he referred to an even more expansive "biologically derived social speculation" (1944, p. 74). When he wished to condemn, as in SDAT's summation, Hofstadter reduced

¹² Thus could Spencer write an extended two-part paper on "The Inadequacy of Natural Selection" (1893).

¹³ In fact, Sumner mentions Darwin a few times in *Folkways*, but the point remains.

social Darwinism to “survival of the fittest” doctrine. In Hofstadter’s 1959 introduction to SDAT, Hofstadter retrospectively characterized SDAT as an inquiry into “the effect of Darwin’s work upon social thinking in America,” though there is, in fact, very little of Darwin’s work considered in SDAT (1992, p. 4).

As these varying definitions suggest, Hofstadter in SDAT sometimes ran together Darwinism with evolutionary ideas more generally. One cause of Hofstadter’s conflation was his early-1940s view that biological explanations (Darwinian and other) of society were illegitimate, full stop. However, the Hofstadter schema that opposed biological with non-biological (read: cultural) explanations in social science, applied to the 1860–1915 era, had very little cutting power. With the notable exception of Franz Boas and his school, very few of the writers SDAT surveyed could be placed on the non-biological (read: cultural) side of this dichotomy.

The stronger divide in SDAT is not, then, between those who used Darwinian (or other evolutionary) ideas to defend their social scientific claims and their critics who did not. The stronger divide in SDAT, the schema with greater cutting power, is Hofstadter’s opposition between laissez-faire (individualism) and economic reform (collectivism). SDAT begins with the advocates of individualism and economic competition, Spencer and Sumner. The rest of the book is taken up with their reform critics. Thus, whether or not we judge “Darwinist” to be an accurate modifier, did Hofstadter oppose “Darwinist individualism” to “Darwinist collectivism.”

Spencer and Sumner are, of course, the defenders of laissez-faire. Hofstadter devotes an entire chapter to only one other figure, “Lester Frank Ward: Critic,” and SDAT pivots on this chapter. But critic of what? True, Ward was no friend of Darwinism. He also was a vigorous critic of Spencer and Sumner, on whom Hofstadter hung the epithet “social Darwinist.” However, Ward did not criticize Spencer and Sumner because they had wrongly appropriated Darwinian ideas in defense of laissez-faire, for Spencer and Sumner were not, we have seen, especially Darwinist. In fact, Ward explicitly rejected the use of “social Darwinism” as a synonym for their free-market economics. [Ward \(1907a, p. 292\)](#) said plainly,

I have never seen any distinctively Darwinian principle appealed to in discussions of ‘social Darwinism.’ It is therefore wholly inappropriate to characterize as social Darwinism the *laissez faire* doctrine of political economists That *laissez faire* doctrine is false and not sustained by biological principles I freely admit and have abundantly shown, but the fallacy involved is to be found in an entirely different department of scientific investigation.

Therefore, though Ward was a critic of (aspects of) Darwinism and also of laissez-faire, his two critiques were distinct, and it is Ward’s critique of laissez-faire, I argue, that has primacy in the analytical structure of SDAT. Ward, after all, was not a critic of “biologically derived social speculation,” to use Hofstadter’s more expansive definition of social Darwinism. To the contrary, it was Ward who insisted in his critique of Sumner that all sociologists should be biologists (Hofstadter, 1944, p. 63). The younger [Ward \(1891\)](#) had flirted with eugenics,¹⁴ and Ward defended a theory of race conflict (originally promulgated by the Austrian sociologists Ludwig Gumplowicz and Gustav Ratzenhofer) as an explanation of progressive social evolution. In 1906, Ward explained race conflict theory as the “sociological homologue of natural selection” (1907b, p. 585). Even when Jacques Novicow called Ward a social Darwinist because Novicow regarded race-conflict theory a wrongful defense of war, Ward denied the charge but did not retreat from race-conflict theory.¹⁵

Hofstadter (1944, p. 62) acknowledged (some of) Ward’s history, but dismissed it, insisting that Ward’s theory of race conflict “found but a small place in his work.” Ward, however, in a three-part article surveying contemporary sociology, wrote that “doctrine of the struggle of races,” was the most important subject in sociology. The struggle of the races, Ward averred, “forms so large a part of my own conception of sociology that it will be necessary to deal with it extensively elsewhere” (1902, p. 759). He dealt with it principally in *Pure Sociology* (1903, p. 238), where he said flatly, “war has been the chief and leading condition of human progress” and that “when races stop struggling progress ceases”. The point is less to enter into the scholarly debate about the influence of biology upon Ward’s social science or the centrality of race-conflict theory to Ward’s sociology. The point is more to argue that in SDAT, the “critic” Ward functions more as a critic of laissez-faire than as a critic of the use of biology in social sciences per se. Ward, moreover, served in SDAT not only as an opponent of individualism and economic competition, but also as the champion of the “managed society,” what Hofstadter called the “conscious and directed change of society” (1992, p. 7).

Beginning with the end of the Depression years, mid-20th century American historians rediscovered Ward as a seminal progressive thinker. Chugerman (1939) wrote a book entitled *Lester Frank Ward: The American Aristotle*. Henry Steele Commager ([Ward, 1967](#)) later celebrated Ward as the rightful architect of the American welfare state. Hofstadter likewise depicted Ward as a “forerunner of social planning,” a pioneer “who preached a planned society,” and who was a “champion of the masses” (1944, pp. 55–66).

Ward’s theory fundamentally distinguished “telic” phenomena, those governed by human will or purpose, from “genetic” phenomena, those that are the product of random natural forces. When Ward said that “the fundamental principle of biology

¹⁴ In his 1891 presidential address to the Biological Society of Washington, Ward suggested that the “crime of perpetuating the least taint of hereditary disease, insanity or other serious defect” could and ultimately would be prevented by “a practical and successful stirpiculture,” using an earlier term for eugenics. Said Ward, “artificial selection has given to man the most that he possesses of value in the organic products of the earth. May not men and women be selected as well as sheep and horses? ... At least we should by a rigid selection stamp out of the future all the wholly unworthy elements” (in [Ward, 1913](#), p. 739).

¹⁵ This story, especially Ward’s tortuous attempts to reconcile race-conflict theory with his opposition to Darwinism, is well told in Bellomy (1984, pp. 54–63).

is natural selection, [and] that of sociology is artificial selection," he was not making a eugenic argument as such; he was defending his view that natural and social evolution were different and that society could (and should) direct its own social evolution.¹⁶

The critics of reform, read through Ward's dichotomy, thought of society as governed by "genetic" phenomena: social change is the product of "the planless outcome of random variations," not of social intervention (1944, p. 64). What is more, social evolution, like natural evolution, was slow and gradual. This is what Hofstadter means when he refers to the "cold determinism of Spencer's philosophy" (1944, p. 85).¹⁷ The progressive proponents of reform, in contrast, regarded social evolution as "telic," amenable to human purpose, in particular, amenable to planned social control of markets. "Man's task is not to imitate the laws of nature," wrote Hofstadter, "but to observe them, appropriate them, direct them" (1992, p. 74).

A key distinction here concerns the appropriate unit of theoretical account. In the Progressive Era, progressive reformers abandoned classically liberal individualism, which was characteristic not just of anti-statists such as Spencer and Sumner, but also of the Mugwumps, the Gilded Age reform precursors of progressivism. Ward pioneered the American progressive emphasis on the nation or state or society as the rightful unit of theoretical account, the holism that Hofstadter called "solidarism." The progressive emphasis on social control required more than purpose, after all, for Spencer's Lamarckian self-help was nothing if not purposeful. It also required a view that a collective, be it nation or state or society, could have purposes or interests beyond those of its individual members. "Purposeful activity must henceforth be recognized as a proper function not only of the individual," read Hofstadter's gloss on Ward, "but of the whole society" (1944, p. 64).

In practice, the overarching Progressive Era question for political economy was what the relationship of the state to the economy should be. SDAT located on one side of the divide the progressive defenders of reform, who, as pioneered by Ward, saw collective welfare as best promoted by state economic experts who would direct improvement of human society. On the other side SDAT placed the proponents of free-market economics, who denied the existence of social interests beyond those of the individuals who constitute society and who saw voluntary exchange rather than social planning as the source of economic well being. Just as Ward the "critic" was a critic of free-market economics, so too were progressives given the title of "dissenters" in SDAT's chapter six. Their dissent was not to "biologically derived social speculation," for many were enthusiastic biologizers, but to laissez-faire.

Looking back from the early 1940s, when the New Deal had already radically transformed the relationship of the American state to the economy and when the United States government was planning economic production to increase output for the war effort, Hofstadter declared victory for planning and collectivism over free markets and individualism. "The managed society which Ward had anticipated and which Sumner had so stoutly opposed," wrote Hofstadter, "was becoming a reality." "Despite the interruption of the twenties," Hofstadter continued, "the trend toward social cohesion kept growing" (1944, p. 101). As New Deal legislation piled up, Hofstadter wrote acidly, "the sons of the generation that applauded Spencer witnessed the creation of a state machinery far greater than any that could have appeared in the Victorian individualist's worst nightmare" (1944, p. 102).

6. Hofstadter₂: Darwinist individualism and Darwinist collectivism

SDAT was a very successful book. Donald Bellomy, whose meticulous survey of social Darwinism (and its historiography) is exhaustive, called SDAT "the single most influential work on the subject" (1984, p. 6). Success notwithstanding, SDAT's legacy is an ambiguous one. Hofstadter₁ condemned free-market economics with the slur "social Darwinism" and, by opposing economic reform to free-market economics, offered a tale "of heroic liberals snatching helpless social science from the clutches of vile Social Darwinists" (Bellomy, 1984, p. 18).

But Hofstadter was too talented a scholar to neglect Darwinian and other evolutionary influences upon progressives. Indeed Hofstadter₂ documented that some of those heroic liberals promoted eugenics or scientific racism or imperialism. As far as I can tell, Hofstadter never applied the epithet "social Darwinist" to a progressive, a practice that continues to this day.¹⁸ However, Hofstadter₂ recognized (what he saw as) the influence of Darwinist and other evolutionary ideas upon those with collectivist views, enough to devise a term for the phenomenon, "Darwinist collectivism."

When SDAT turned to the Progressive Era in its last two substantive chapters, the evidence of biological influence upon reformers was impressive.¹⁹ Hofstadter acknowledged that Thorstein Veblen, *if sui generis*, was probably the most Darwinist of all Progressive Era political economists (1992, pp. 152–156). He noted Wharton School reformer Simon Patten's quasi-eugenic attempt to integrate biology into political economy. He recognized that Richard T. Ely and the reform insurgents who founded the American Economic Association in 1885 made Sumner their foil, but never on grounds that Sumner misapplied Darwin. Sumner's "social Darwinism" to the progressive economists consisted of opposition to reform.

Hofstadter, we have seen, acknowledged Lester Frank Ward's defense of race-conflict theory. Hofstadter's chapter "Racism and Imperialism" found progressive Theodore Roosevelt defending a hairy-chested brand of race-conscious imperialism.

¹⁶ Ward, *The Psychic Factors of Civilization*, pp. 134–35, cited in Hofstadter (1944, p. 62).

¹⁷ Hofstadter's 1959 introduction to SDAT identified two key ideological commitments of "conservative" thought: "survival of the fittest," and gradualism, the claim that "all sound development must be slow and unhurried" (1992, p. 7).

¹⁸ There are rare exceptions. One of SDAT's reviews, for example, referred to "Veblen's own brand of social Darwinism" (Bennett, 1945, p. 450).

¹⁹ I am using the term "biological" to describe Hofstadter's inclusive characterization of the scholars and scientists in question, not their views as such.

Hofstadter acknowledged Social Gospeler and reformer Josiah Strong's militant Anglo-Saxonism. He recorded that biologist and Stanford University president David Starr Jordan, a leader of the American peace movement, protested against the First World War on grounds the war was dysgenic: the fittest men were killed, while the weaklings stayed home. Moreover, Hofstadter in one place granted the appeal of eugenics to the progressive economist-turned-sociologist, Edward A. Ross.

Thus, however one judges Hofstadter₁'s claim that free-market economics in the Gilded Age was Darwinist, and the revisionist historiography has judged it harshly, Hofstadter₂ found evolutionary justifications of eugenics, racism, and imperialism made by progressives. In fact, said Hofstadter₂, after 1890, "Darwinist collectivism" superseded the "Darwinist individualism" of Spencer and Sumner, reflecting the Progressive Era's new openness toward greater state involvement in the economy and society.

7. The "Two-Hofstadters" legacies of SDAT

Both Hofstadters have had an impact, but in different ways and at different times. Hofstadter₁, who attached the epithet "social Darwinism" to the free-market views of Spencer and Sumner and who made progressive opposition to such "social Darwinism" heroic, realized immediate and lasting influence. Not one of SDAT's nineteen reviews published in JSTOR missed the key Hofstadter₁ innovation of calling laissez-faire "social Darwinism," and few have since.

Hofstadter₂, who recognized that Darwinism influenced an extraordinary range of ideological views, including "Darwinist collectivism," also started strong. Several of SDAT's reviewers drew attention to the Hofstadter₂ thesis that Darwinism was a neutral instrument, "capable of supporting opposite ideologies" (1944, p. 174). Joseph Blau's review even argued that Hofstadter's "most significant point" was SDAT's "recognition of dual sociological traditions stemming from Darwinism . . . Darwinian individualism he uses as a description of [a] type of conservative capitalist apologetics . . . Darwinian collectivism urged control of the social environment to substitute conscious evolution for the play of natural forces" (1945, p. 192). Cochran (1945, p. 251) likewise noted "the final irony that another group of 'collectivists,' translating the competitive struggle for survival into national terms, made these theories, originally so heartening to the supporters of laissez-faire, into a sanction for imperialism, racism and war."

However some reviewers missed (or ignored) Hofstadter₂'s claim that Darwinism was a protean doctrine with both individualist and collectivist versions and instead seized upon Hofstadter₁'s discrediting of free-market economics as social Darwinism, and his depiction of progressive reform as opposed to social Darwinism. Montagu's (1946, p. 146) review in *Isis*, for example, offered a gloss that was pure Hofstadter₁: it identified Spencer with Social Darwinism and argued that the "gradual dissolution of Social Darwinism [came] through the agency of its principal critics," where Ward and the progressive reformers were the "critics." Montagu ignored Hofstadter₂'s (1944, p. 174) account of how "Darwinian individualism declined, [while] Darwinian collectivism of the nationalist or racist kind was beginning to take hold".

Loewenberg's (1945, p. 821) review conflated the two Hofstadters. Though Loewenberg recognized something like Hofstadter₂'s insight into the varieties of Darwinism, individualist (Sumner), and collectivist (Ward), he then proceeded to ride roughshod over the distinction in favor of the Hofstadter₁ technique of derogating Spencer and Sumner, however inaccurately. In particular, Loewenberg suggested that "American imperialist and racist ideologies" were the product of individualist Darwinism, not, as Hofstadter₂ had it, of collectivist Darwinism. Princeton's David F. Bowers likewise elided SDAT's distinction between individualist and collectivist Darwinism, saying "Spencer's biological approach to social theory provided support for the biological approach to history implicit in all racist and imperialist propaganda" (1945, p. 104).

Of course, both Spencer and Sumner vigorously opposed imperialism, as might reasonably be expected of two leading exponents of limited government. In *Social Statics*, Spencer scorned English attempts to "justify our colonial aggressions by saying that the Creator intends the Anglo-Saxon race to people the world" (1851, p. 142). He condemned the "piratical spirit" of imperialism and insisted that "territorial aggression is as impolitic as it is unjust" (1851, p. 322). Sumner, for his part, openly criticized the Spanish-American War, saying that "my patriotism is of the kind which is outraged by the notion that the United States was never a great nation until [this] . . . petty three months campaign" (Sumner 1911b, p. 334).²⁰

Bowers, again running together Hofstadter₂'s distinction between individualist and collectivist Darwinism, even claimed to find in SDAT "[Herbert Spencer's] . . . important influence on the eugenics movement of the period" (1945, p. 104). It would seem a stretch to claim that Herbert Spencer advocated planned state control of human breeding, but that charge emerged immediately in the wake of SDAT and can still be found today.²¹

From the beginning, then, though virtually none of SDAT's readers missed Hofstadter₁, some have missed or ignored Hofstadter₂. In some sense this is reconstructable: the ideas of Hofstadter₂ were, in SDAT, undeveloped relative to those of Hofstadter₁. Thus could historian of science William Coleman say, writing in 1966, "the two Darwinisms have yet to find their historian." Hofstadter's SDAT, Coleman judged, reviewed only individualist Darwinism in depth (1966, p. 33).

²⁰ When Hofstadter briefly notes Sumner's opposition to American expansion, he quips that "those who were familiar with Sumner's crisp iconoclasm on . . . democracy may have rubbed their eyes to see the intransigent schoolmaster attack imperialists for preparing the abandonment of the nation's democratic principles" (1992, p. 195). Hofstadter's quip is more than a cheap shot; it is an admission that his taxonomy could not accommodate a classically liberal opposition to the expansion of state power.

²¹ Thrurow (1997, p. 249) proposed, for example, "Spencer created the eugenics movement to stop the unfit from reproducing" [emphasis added]. Even more scholarly writers have repeated the canard that Spencer was a eugenicist; see Black (2003).

Post-SDAT historians, following [Goldman \(1952\)](#), would refer to the progressives' use of Darwin as *reform Darwinism*, to be contrasted with *conservative Darwinism*. Goldman coined new terms in order to designate more clearly the distinction Hofstadter₂ made between ideological uses of Darwin in support of reform from those in support of free markets. In some respects, Goldman's nomenclature is a tip of the cap to Hofstadter₂, but that Goldman felt compelled to coin new terminology suggests that Hofstadter₂'s terms, "Darwinian individualism" and "Darwinian collectivism," did not acquire much currency, as indeed they did not.

Measured by terminological citation in JSTOR, Hofstadter₁ has buried Hofstadter₂. The term "social Darwinism," which Hofstadter (in the guise of Hofstadter₁) reserved for those he wished to disparage, including Spencer and Sumner, acquired enormous currency after the publication of SDAT. "Social Darwinism," is cited 4236 times from 1944 to the present, and fully one-third of these citations also mention Spencer and/or Sumner. Hofstadter₂, measured by terminological usage, left no mark whatsoever. The terms Hofstadter₂ employed, "Darwinian collectivism" and "Darwinian individualism," appear a scant fourteen times from 1944 to the present, and eight of these occurred in the reviews of SDAT.²² Hofstadter himself, in his 1959 introduction to SDAT, opted to forgo his earlier terms, "Darwinian collectivism" and "Darwinian individualism."²³

Painting with a broad brush, we can identify three legacies of SDAT. First is Hofstadter₁'s association of social Darwinism with free-market economics, that is, with economic competition and individualism. Hofstadter's most influential SDAT innovation, tarring laissez-faire with "social Darwinism," has proven especially durable and salient. Post-SDAT, fully one-third of the 4236 JSTOR articles and reviews containing "social Darwinism" also mention Herbert Spencer and/or William Graham Sumner.²⁴ Before Hofstadter, Spencer and Sumner were rarely, if ever, known as social Darwinists.²⁵ After Hofstadter, the two men were transformed into arch-social Darwinists.

This legacy, the Hofstadter₁ legacy, made Spencer and Sumner into social Darwinists. In extreme form, its interpreters treat Spencer and Sumner as the *only* social Darwinists, a view that required ignoring or dismissing the Hofstadter₂ of SDAT. When, for example, [Tanenhaus \(2006\)](#) reviewed David S. Brown's Hofstadter biography in the *New York Times*, he summarized SDAT as follows: a "discourse on 19th-century social scientists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, who had debased the theory of natural selection into high-minded apologetics for Gilded Age rapacity, with help from the racially tinged speculations in Darwin's own 'Descent of Man.'" Score one for Hofstader₁.

SDAT's second legacy arises from the connection between what Bellomy calls the "conceptual elasticity" of "social Darwinism," the decline of Hofstadter₂'s distinction between individualist Darwinism (laissez-faire) and collectivist Darwinism (racism, imperialism and eugenics), and the historically pejorative connotations of "social Darwinism."

It is the case that SDAT give impetus to the novel association of social Darwinism not only with laissez-faire, but also with racism (in addition to the earlier senses of war and imperialism). With the terminological atrophy of the conceptual distinctions Hofstadter₂ made between such diverse phenomena as laissez-faire, racism, imperialism and eugenics, there has been a tendency, enforced by "social Darwinism's" long history as a slur, to depict all these phenomena in common, as Bad Things.²⁶

Never mind that the set of Gilded Age and Progressive Era writers who endorsed laissez-faire, racism, imperialism, and eugenics is essentially empty, making their putative commonality historically vacuous. When viewed retrospectively, "social Darwinism" functions as a synecdoche for all that an early-1940s New Deal liberal (and many since) would regard as retrograde and reactionary. Despite the efforts of Hofstadter₂, who showed that some of what looked reactionary to mid-20th century liberal eyes was called progressive 40 years earlier, this retrospective lumping together of historically diverse phenomena is also a legacy of SDAT.

If Hofstadter₂'s *name* for collectivist Darwinism did not survive, his association of Darwinism with collective phenomena such as eugenics, racism, and imperialism did. Later historians took up the story of "collectivist Darwinism," especially the influence of eugenics upon Anglo-American social thought. In spite of the fact, or perhaps because of the fact that eugenics is, in important respects, non-Darwinian, this too is a (third) legacy of SDAT, the one that took longest to manifest.

8. SDAT on eugenics

Hofstadter's discussion of eugenics in SDAT is brief and incomplete. "Eugenics" did not even earn a place in SDAT's index, but it is nonetheless important. First, it was unusual for a mid-20th century volume primarily concerned with Progressive Era reform even to acknowledge eugenic influences on American thought. After the atrocities of the German National Socialists

²² Search of "Darwinian individualism," "Darwinian collectivism," "collectivist Darwinism" or "individualist Darwinism," from 1944 to 12 June 2007. The search space was 2.3 million articles and reviews.

²³ Hofstadter in 1959 did not abandon the SDAT concept that there were individualist and collectivist forms of Darwinism, but while still associating social Darwinism with "laissez-faire conservatives," he abandoned the term "collectivist Darwinism" in favor of the more ambiguous "critics of social Darwinism" (1992, pp. 5–6).

²⁴ A case-insensitive search (including plural forms) of "social Darwinist," "social Darwinism" and "social Darwinian," from 1944 to 12 June 2007, yielded 4236 hits. Of these, 1416 included a reference to Spencer or Sumner or both. The search space was 2.3 million articles and reviews.

²⁵ [Hodgson \(2004\)](#) makes a similar point, but dates the change to the 1930s.

²⁶ A recent front-page *New York Times* article provides a current example of the Bad-Things conflation. Reporter [Cohen \(2007\)](#) wrote, "Victorian-era social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer adopted evolutionary theory to justify colonialism and imperialism, opposition to labor unions and the withdrawal of aid to the sick and needy." *The Times* was obliged to run a correction 1 week later. It read, "A front-page article last Saturday about a dispute among some conservatives over whether Darwinian theory undermines or supports conservative principles erroneously included one social Darwinist among Victorian-era social Darwinists who adopted evolutionary theory to justify colonialism and imperialism. Herbert Spencer opposed both."

were exposed, “eugenics” became (and still is) a dirty word. Second, Hofstadter’s discussion, however perfunctory, exemplified the SDAT tension between its two desiderata: economic reform is better than laissez-faire, and cultural explanations are better than biological explanations in social science. For Progressive Era eugenics, the planned social control of human heredity, was, at once, reformist and biological.

This tension led Hofstadter in sometimes opposed directions. Eugenics, said Hofstadter, was just social Darwinism “decked out in a somewhat new guise” (1944, p. 138). Hofstadter₁ thus tended to treat eugenics and social Darwinism monolithically, both “fundamentally conservative” and instances of reactionary apologetics for the social order. However, Hofstadter₂ recognized that “the eugenics craze had about it the air of ‘a reform’”; eugenics, Hofstadter₂ pointed out, “failed to draw sweeping laissez-faire conclusions,” and it “accepted the principle of state action toward a common end, and spoke in terms of the collective destiny of a group rather than individual success” (1944, pp. 140, 144). Though Hofstadter did not pursue the connection he made between progressivism and eugenics, later historians did (Pickens, 1968; Paul, 1984).

We now know that eugenics was popular, widespread and respectable among American progressive economists and their allies during the Progressive Era (Leonard, 2003, 2005). A *Who’s Who* of progressive American labor reform, for example, argued that the biological infirmities of immigrants, blacks, women, and mental and moral defectives caused low wages, justifying their removal (or exclusion) from the labor force.²⁷ This line of research, too, can be seen as a partial legacy of SDAT.

As much as Hofstadter₂ recognized the collectivist and statist elements of eugenics, and thereby its reform aspect, Hofstadter₁ was still working with the schema that made reform the opposite pole of social Darwinism. This ambivalence is manifest throughout SDAT’s eugenics discussion. While Hofstadter₁ dismissed eugenics as so much “social Darwinism,” Hofstadter₂ recorded an important historical difference between eugenics and social Darwinism. For, recall, SDAT declared social Darwinism dead during World War I, but maintained that eugenics was alive and well, reaching, circa 1915, the proportions of a fad. Whether or not it was the reform elements of American eugenics that sustained it past the death of social Darwinism, Hofstadter is here simultaneously identifying eugenics with social Darwinism while insisting upon their differences.

SDAT noted Lester Frank Ward’s criticism of Francis Galton, who is conventionally identified as the father of modern eugenics, but Ward’s attack was upon Galton’s neo-Darwinian hereditarianism, not eugenics as such, a distinction that Hofstadter elides. Indeed Ward (1891) once flirted with eugenic ideas, and a number of progressive eugenicists were, like Ward, Lamarckians.

Hofstadter cited Oliver Wendell Holmes’ famous dissenting line in *Lochner v. New York* (1905), that “the fourteenth amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statics*,” as evidence of progressive opposition to the beneficial selective effects of economic competition (1944, p. 465), but Hofstadter neglected the inconvenient fact that Holmes himself was a partisan of selection, a eugenicist who later confided to Harold Laski that “in upholding the constitutionality of a state law upholding for sterilizing imbeciles . . . [I] felt I was getting near to the first principle of real reform” (in Degler, 1991, p. 47).²⁸

Hofstadter called upon Chicago sociologist and reformer Charles Henderson to testify to the social Darwinism of Gilded Age businessmen defending laissez-faire (a point made by Wyllie, 1959). He neglected to note Henderson’s eugenicist credentials. Henderson (1909) opposed immigration of the “unfit” and proposed that the “feeble-minded and degenerate” (of whatever nationality) be banished to rural labor colonies. “It is clearly and distinctly the right of a commonwealth,” argued Henderson (1909, pp. 228–229), “to deprive [the unfit] of liberty and so prevent their propagation of defects and thus the perpetuation of their misery in their offspring. Therefore the policy of painless asexualization is offered . . .”

Hofstadter characterized American opposition to immigration generally in nativist terms, a group he did not in SDAT associate with reform: “The influx of a large immigrant population from peasant countries of central and southern Europe, hard to assimilate because of rustic habits and language barriers, gave color to the notion that immigration was lowering the standard of American intelligence,” Hofstadter (1944, p. 139) wrote, “so at least it seemed to nativists who assumed that a glib command of English is a natural criterion of intellectual capacity”. Hofstadter neglected the fact that it was a progressive economist, Edward Bemis (1888), who devised the idea of a literacy test to exclude racially undesirable immigrants.

Indeed from SDAT one would know almost nothing of the leading role played by progressive economists (and other reformers) in advocating eugenically motivated immigration and labor legislation. In *Races and Immigrants*, the University of Wisconsin economist and social reformer John R. Commons argued that immigrant labor competition selects for the unfit races; “The competition has no respect for the superior races,” said Commons (1907, p. 151), and “the race with lowest necessities displaces others.”²⁹ Wharton School reformer Nearing (1915, p. 22) volunteered that if “an employer has a Scotchman

²⁷ Beatrice and Sidney Webbs’ taxonomy of the unfit included “Children, the aged, and the child-bearing women . . . the sick and the crippled, the idiots and lunatics, the epileptic, the blind and the deaf and dumb, the criminals and the incorrigibly idle, and all those who are actually ‘morally deficient’ . . . and [those] incapable of steady or continuous application, or who are so deficient in strength, speed or skill that they are incapable of producing their maintenance at any occupation whatsoever” (Webb and Webb, 1920 [1897], p. 785).

²⁸ Holmes wrote in *Buck v. Bell*: “We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices . . . in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence” 274 US 207 (1927).

²⁹ Because race rather than productivity determined living standards, Commons could populate his low-wage-races category with the industrious and lazy alike. African-Americans were, for Commons (1907, p. 136), “indolent and fickle,” which explained why, Commons argued, slavery was required: “The negro could not possibly have found a place in American industry had he come as a free man . . . [I]f such races are to adopt that industrious life which is second nature to races of the temperate zones, it is only through some form of compulsion.”

working for him at \$3 a day [and] an equally efficient Lithuanian offers to the same work for \$2 . . . the work is given to the low bidder."

Royal Meeker, Woodrow Wilson's U.S. Commissioner of Labor, opposed subsidies to the wages of poor workers. Meeker preferred a minimum wage because it would disemploy unfit workers and thereby facilitate their culling from the work force. "It is much better to enact a minimum-wage law even if it deprives these unfortunates of work," argued Meeker. "Better that the state should support the inefficient wholly and prevent the multiplication of the breed than subsidize incompetence and unthrift, enabling them to bring forth more of their kind" (1910, p. 554).

Columbia University progressive Henry Seager (1913, p. 9) wrote, "The operation of the minimum wage requirement would merely extend the definition of defectives to embrace all individuals, who even after having received special training, remain incapable of adequate self-support." Seager (1913, p. 10) made clear what should happen to those who, even after remedial training, could not earn the legal minimum: "If we are to maintain a race that is to be made up of capable, efficient and independent individuals and family groups we must courageously cut off lines of heredity that have been proved to be undesirable by isolation or sterilization."

In these cases, it seems that Hofstadter₁ trumped Hofstadter₂. In one instance, however, the case of Edward A. Ross, both Hofstadters appear within four pages of one another. Speaking of Ross and fellow sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, Hofstadter₁ opined, "men like Cooley and Ross refused to look upon the poor as unfit or to worship at the shrine of the fittest" (1992, p. 160). This was nonsense. Ross, especially, was quite happy to worship at the shrine of fittest, provided the fittest were selected by state experts.

It was Ross who had coined the term "race suicide," a Progressive Era catchphrase for the process by which racially superior stock (Yankee natives) is outbred by a more prolific, but inferior stock (immigrants). In Ross's view, the racially inferior immigrant races, "Latins, Slavs, Asiatics, and Hebrews," were better adapted to the conditions of industrial capitalism and thus would outbreed the superior Anglo-Saxon race (1901b). Thereby, Ross volunteered, "the higher race quietly and unmurmuringly eliminates itself rather than endure individually the bitter competition it has failed to ward off by collective action" (1901a, p. 88).³⁰ Cooley, for his part, went so far as to suggest that the unfit endanger society "in a manner analogous to that in which the presence of inferior cattle in a herd endangers the biological type" (1909, p. 296).³¹

Hofstadter₂, however, knew that Ross was a particularly outspoken advocate of race-based immigration restriction and recognized that Ross's position was premised on the claim that some groups among the poor are unfit. Thus, a mere four pages after insisting that Ross did not worship at the shrine of the fittest, Hofstadter (in the guise of Hofstadter₂) acknowledged that the eugenicists' "biological data . . . were convincing to men like E.A. Ross, who had thoroughly repudiated Spencerian individualism" (1992, p. 64).

Hofstadter's ambivalence is clear. Ross was a leading progressive whose reform advocacy SDAT (in the form of Hofstadter₁) had depicted as opposed to survival of the fittest dogma because reform is opposed to "Spencerian individualism." However, Ross, at the same time, promoted a racist form of eugenics, what Hofstadter₂ called "collectivist Darwinism."

In the end, Hofstadter₂ took some important preliminary steps. He recognized that eugenics was a collectivist doctrine, that it rejected individualism in favor of a race or class or stratum of intelligence. Hofstadter₂ also recognized that Progressive Era eugenics was statist, that it opposed laissez-faire values by substituting an objective, expert determination of the social good for a subjective, individual determination of the social good. Laissez-faire eugenics, as Sidney Webb had boasted, was, in the Progressive Era, a contradiction in terms.³² Nonetheless, Hofstadter₁, who had portrayed reform as the polar opposite of social Darwinism (as laissez-faire), carried the day in this part of SDAT: it does not discuss or even identify the many influential reformers who were drawn to eugenic explanations of social and economic life.³³

9. "Tarring Darwin with a Malthusian Brush"³⁴

It is a commonplace among Left scholars in the Darwin industry to argue that Darwin himself was a social Darwinist from the beginning. Not only is the Darwin of the *Descent of Man* a social Darwinist, but so too is the Darwin of *The Origin of Species*, which contains no references to *homo sapiens*. Marxist historian Robert Young (1982) so argues in "Darwinism Is Social" and in other places; and biologist Richard Lewontin (1990) claims for the critique the status of "received doctrine" among historians.

The argument goes as follows. Darwin, say these critics, cannot be represented, as internalist histories too often do, as a naive naturalist, somehow unaware of or unconcerned with the political and economic events of his day. Darwin was, rather, a well-read Victorian sophisticate, acquainted with Malthus, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson (Schweber, 1977). Indeed, when properly interpreted, Darwin's theory of natural selection should be seen as laden with Malthusian values,

³⁰ More than 40 years after the American Civil War, Ross (1907, p. 715) wrote, "The theory that races are virtually equal in capacity leads to such monumental follies as lining the valleys of the South with the bones of half a million picked whites in order to improve the conditions of four million unpicked blacks."

³¹ On Cooley and eugenics, see McCann (2009).

³² Said Webb (1910–1911, p. 237) flatly, "[N]o consistent eugenicist can be a 'Laissez Faire' individualist unless he throws up the game in despair. He must interfere, interfere, interfere!"

³³ There were many other Progressive Era reformers who endorsed the eugenic virtues of exclusionary labor and immigration legislation. See Leonard (2003).

³⁴ I owe this phrase to Donald Winch (2001).

enough that *The Origin of Species* should be read as capitalist apologetic, an attempt to lend laissez-faire orthodoxy the imprimaturs of “natural” and of “science.” “Darwin,” say Adrian Desmond and James Moore, “plac[ed] Nature on industry’s side” (1991, p. 421). The theory of organic evolution by natural selection, goes the critique, should be seen a simple projection onto nature of Malthusian political economy, the kind that justified capitalist travesties such as the English Poor Law of 1834.

The notion that Darwinism is just an apology for Malthusian political economy has a long pedigree in radical thought; Marx and Engels both made remarks in this vein. Hofstadter in SDAT is on, well, both sides of the matter.

On the one hand, Hofstadter (in the guise of Hofstadter₂) defended what the Darwin-as-Malthusian-apologist view denies, that “intrinsically, [Darwinism] was a neutral instrument, capable of supporting opposite ideologies”; “Kropotkin’s interpretation,” said Hofstadter₂, “was as logical as Sumner’s” (1944, p. 174).

On the other hand, Hofstadter offered support to the Darwin-as-Malthusian-apologist view when (in the guise of Hofstadter₁) he tried to explain the lack of Darwinism in late 19th-century orthodox (read: laissez-faire) American political economy. Why is it, SDAT asks, that economists such as J. Lawrence Laughlin and Arthur Latham Perry show no trace of Darwin? How to explain the “failure of orthodox economists to embrace social Darwinism as preached by Sumner.” After all, Hofstadter₁ volunteered, Darwinism was “so obviously adapted to the function of their [economics] discipline as they conceive it.” (1944, p. 122).

The Hofstadter₁ answer was that economics did not need Darwinism because “it already had its own doctrine of selection.” In fact, said Hofstadter₁, it was classical political economy that influenced the theorists of organic evolution rather than the other way around. The theorists of organic evolution (Spencer, Darwin and Wallace), Hofstadter continued, were led by Malthusian political economy to their evolutionary theories, enough that economists might well be justified in “proclaiming that biology had merely universalized a truth which had been in their possession for a long time” (1944, p. 122). Why should classically inclined economists ever cite Charles Darwin when Darwin’s debt to classical political economy, especially to Malthus, was evidently so great that no citation was ever needed? If there was no Darwin in Laughlin and Perry and their ilk, well, that was because Laughlin and Perry were already in Darwin.

Never mind that this analysis assumed what needed to be shown. This is another instance of Hofstadterian ambivalence in SDAT, with an ensuing ambiguous legacy: Hofstadter₂ depicted Darwinism as a neutral instrument, usable for any ideology, while Hofstadter₁ depicted Darwinism as all but the necessary product of Malthusian political economy. Hofstadter₁ proved compatible with the Marxian reading of Darwin, but Hofstadter₂ did not.

What of the merits of the charge made by Hofstadter (in the guise of Hofstadter₁) and later historians of the Left? We can agree that science is social and, further, that the historical Darwin was indeed influenced by Malthus’ population theory. It is also true that evolutionary thought antedated the publication of the *Origin* in 1859 and that this pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory was as concerned (if not more so) with social as with organic evolution. As a methodological injunction, “assume science is social” seems a prudent one.

But does accepting the general position that science is social, and the more specific claim that Darwin was no naïf, oblige us to accept the very specific historical claim that the theory of evolution by natural selection is just Malthusian apologetics? The answer, I think, is “no.” In this I concur with Darwinism scholar Paul Crook: that Darwinism has partial origins in social thought and has been appropriated for ideological uses does not establish the Marxian claim that Darwin has been appropriated uniquely in defense of “Malthusianism,” a.k.a. laissez-faire orthodoxy (Crook, 1996).

There are three difficulties for the Marxian reading of the *Origin* as warmed-over Malthusian political economy.³⁵ First, with respect to consequences, Darwin has found exegetes of virtually all ideologies: laissez-faire and socialist, individualist and communist, militarist and pacifist, pro-natalist and neo-Malthusian, religious and agnostic (Jones, 1998, p. 7). Leading eugenicist Karl Pearson (1894) found a case for socialism in Darwin, as did Alfred Russel Wallace. Russian aristocrat and anarchist Peter Kropotkin found cooperation not conflict in natural selection, explained in his *Mutual Aid* (1902). Darwin himself seems to have been pro-natalist, while neo-Malthusian Margaret Sanger, who coined the term “birth control,” embraced eugenics.³⁶ Darwin’s “bulldog,” T.H. Huxley, thought natural selection suggested agnosticism (he coined the term), while the American Protestant Social Gospelers happily assimilated Darwin to their evangelical reform purposes. It is a tribute to the protean qualities of Darwinism, as Crook points out, that Darwinism could even be assimilated into “traditional value systems, theodicies and moral philosophies . . . that on the whole spurned stark survivor ethics” (1996, p. 268).

The second difficulty is that if Darwin intended the theory of evolution by natural selection to shore up Malthusianism, the co-founder of the theory of evolution by natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace, must have intended it to tear down Malthusianism. For as William Coleman has persuasively argued, the co-founder of natural selection, Alfred R. Wallace, was a socialist who wrote on political economy and who actively opposed competition, free trade, usury, and exports; who championed minimum wages, land nationalization, free bread for the indigent; and who argued that “capital” was “the enemy and tyrant of labour” (2001, p. 39).

³⁵ See Bowler (1976) for a view that Malthus and Darwin had very different conceptions of struggle, with Malthus emphasizing the struggle between man and environment while still imagining a natural harmony within society and Darwin adding the idea of intra-species struggle.

³⁶ On Darwin’s private view of birth control, this during the famous Bradlaugh-Besant trial, see Peart and Levy (2005).

Wallace was to his death a stout defender of Darwin and of their theory of natural selection.³⁷ If political economy determined the theory of natural selection, then, in the case of co-discoverer Wallace, the economic wellspring cannot be Malthus' political economy, but is instead an idiosyncratic blend of radical Owenite political economy and mysticism. Even if it were true that natural selection was devised to apologize for a particular conception of the right economic order, the example of Wallace shows that Owenite socialism is as likely a source as Malthusianism.

A third and related point, as Winch (2001) has argued, is that the Marxian reading of the *Origin* has tended to inflate Malthus' *Essay on Population* into what it calls "Malthusianism." However it was Malthus' population theory that influenced Darwin, and population theory should not be identified with "Malthusianism," an imprecise rubric used by the proponents of the Darwin-as-Malthusian-apologist thesis to cover to a whole host of laissez-faire ideas they associate with orthodox British political economy during the years of the *Origin's* gestation.

Winch argues that there was no such orthodoxy, Malthusian or other: "political economists were no more united than biologists were during this period; they came in different shapes and sizes and were divided among various theoretical, political and methodological lines. Conclusions and attitudes, therefore, cannot be ascribed to the tribe as a whole" (2001, p. 418). Moreover, even Malthus in isolation does not merit the various charges ascribed to "Malthusianism." When the Poor Laws were amended in 1834 (the year of Malthus's death), this was said to be "Malthusian," but Malthus had ceased to support the change; the author of new legislation, Nassau Senior, made no mention of Malthus' population principle and, indeed, regarded it as already obsolete. Nor was Malthus a "Malthusian" in the sense of being, per Desmond and Moore, "a Whig free trader's godsend" (Winch, 2001, p. 426). Winch reminds us that Malthus was, in fact, a conspicuous supporter of protection of agriculture, was skeptical about the merits of substituting manufacturing for agriculture, and was lukewarm at best toward emigration (2001, p. 426). In short, the Malthus who influenced Darwin was not "Malthusian" in the sense intended by those who read the *Origin* as apology for Malthusianism.

SDAT's ambiguity on the matter, Hofstadter₂ depicting Darwinism as a neutral instrument, usable for any ideology and Hofstadter₁ depicting Darwinism as intrinsically Malthusian—presaged some modern treatments. Mike Hawkins' (1997) book on social Darwinism, for example, follows the lead of Hofstadter₂ by documenting the extraordinary diversity of ideologies that have located support in Darwinism. Hawkins writes, for example, that "Darwinism was enlisted by protagonists on all sides of these debates," including, among the "reform Darwinists," "Marxist revolutionaries through to democratic socialists, and new Liberals [and] also . . . anarchists" (1997, p. 141), but then, channeling Hofstadter₁, he concludes that reform uses of Darwin, uses congenial to Hawkins' politics, are not "social Darwinism" proper. Hawkins thus decides, contrary to his own evidence, that the epithet "social Darwinism" is rightfully applied only to Hofstadter₁'s old bugaboo: individualist Darwinism.

10. Conclusion

SDAT gave impetus to two mostly opposed historiographic trends. First, Hofstadter in SDAT succeeded brilliantly in affixing the epithet "social Darwinism" to free-market economics. His many revisionists notwithstanding, SDAT's most conspicuous and enduring legacy is its discrediting of Spencer and Sumner with "social Darwinism." Never mind that neither were especially Darwinist, and never mind that Hofstadter also found Darwinism in reform. In the popular and scholarly mind, Spencer and Sumner are social Darwinism.

Second, Hofstadter's investigations into eugenics, racism and imperialism among progressives, however preliminary, presaged, with a long delay, the revisionist literature that has debunked the hagiographic portrayal of American Progressive Era reformers that existed prior to SDAT,³⁸ and, with it, the progressives' faith in statism and expertise. The literature now recognizes an extremely broad and ideologically diverse set of social thinkers influenced by Darwinian and other evolutionary ideas. Hofstadter in SDAT may have soft-pedaled progressive support for eugenics, racism, and American expansion during the Progressive Era, but he did not ignore it either, and that was innovative in American historical writing of the time.

Work such as Hawkins (1997) are perhaps SDAT's perhaps most direct legacy because they contain both historiographic traditions given impetus by SDAT, however opposed the two traditions would seem to be. These treatments acknowledge what is now a commonplace, the great ideological diversity of social and economic thought influenced by Darwinian and other evolutionary ideas, but they atavistically condemn as "social Darwinist" only one strain thereof, the one that defends individualism and free markets. In a multigenerational echo of SDAT, they, like Hofstadter₂, find Darwinism almost everywhere in social thought, but, also like Hofstadter₁, they still condemn as "social Darwinists" only Spencer and Sumner.

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³⁷ Wallace came to believe that natural selection could not explain certain aspects of the human mind, an apostasy that induced Darwin to lament famously that Wallace had murdered their child, natural selection. Wallace otherwise embraced the theory of natural selection, his own views of political economy being decidedly "non-Malthusian."

³⁸ I thank an anonymous referee for this insight.

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