



Lecture 13
“The Gospel of Evolution
in the Late-19th Century”

"I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear. Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution. 'All is well since all grows better' became my motto, my true source of comfort."

Andrew Carnegie

Road map for today

- The Darwinian Debate: reprise and preparation for Friday
- Evolution: An idea for the times?
- A philosopher for the times
- Spencer, Darwin and “Social Darwinism”
- Social Darwinism comes to the U.S.

1: The Darwinian Debate

What Darwin wanted

- A debate as free as possible of theological issues
- A debate about organic origins, but not (yet) about human origins
- Acceptance of the principle of evolution by natural selection

What actually happened

- A debate preoccupied with issues of Providence and design
- A debate more about 'man's place in nature' than anything else
- Acceptance of evolution, but much skepticism about natural selection

1: The Darwinian Debate

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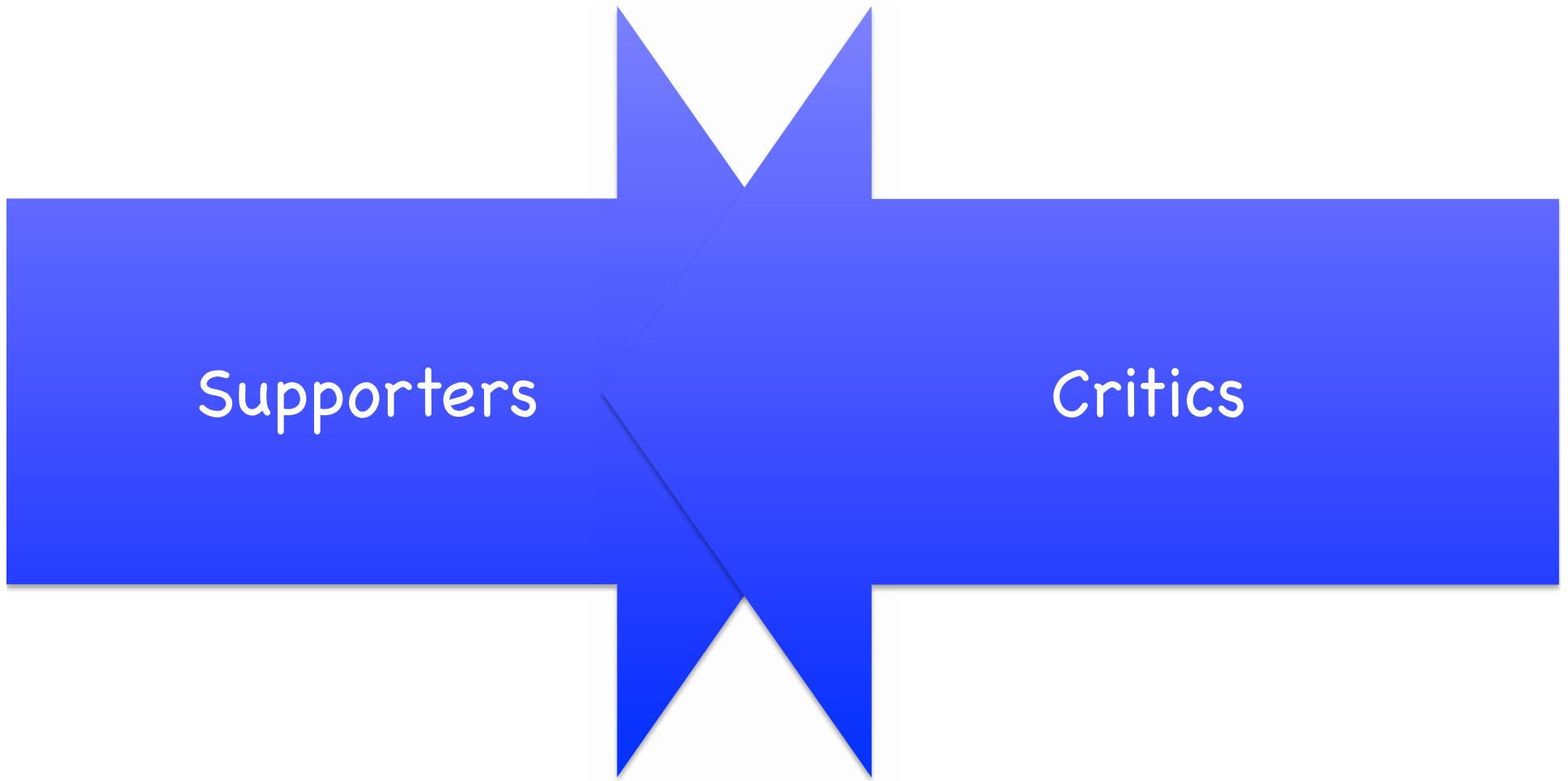
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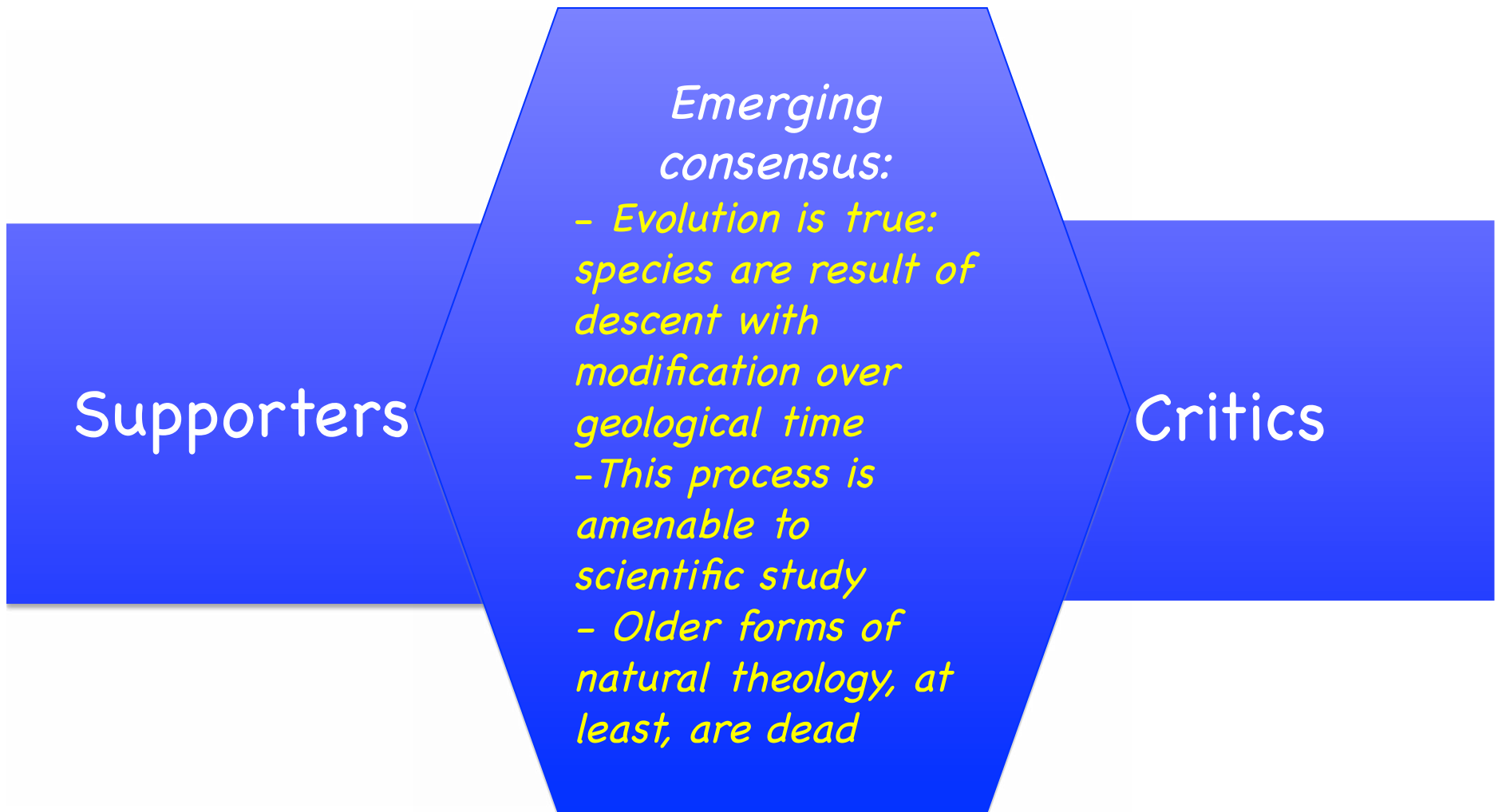
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NB: Authors are never fully in control of how readers choose to interpret or respond to their texts!

Darwinian Debate: Emerging Consensus



Darwinian Debate: Emerging Consensus



Darwinian Debate: Emerging Conflicts



Supporters



Critics

Darwinian Debate: Emerging Conflicts



YOUR Darwinian Debate on Friday

- Have you looked at Debater Fact Files
- Have you all chosen historical characters to “play” in the debate
- Is everyone clear about what they need to prepare for Friday’s debate?
- Is everyone clear about how the debate will actually work?

Points to remember

- This is role play
- The idea is that each of you should “get inside the head” of your chosen character
- You don't have to personally agree with your chosen character
- Your task is to contribute to the debate in your own words, but in the spirit of your chosen character
- The aim is to try to understand the interest and concerns of those who responded to the *Origin*
 - What were their concerns, and why did they have them?
 - Why impact did they have on the reception of the *Origin*?

2: The Gospel of Evolution

- In the late-19th century, evolution became one of the most talked about ideas in the English-speaking world
- There was a veritable “explosion” of evolutionary theories about almost everything:
 - Mind, including language & the ‘moral sense’
 - Human racial, sexual and individual differences
 - Human cultures, from “primitive” to “advanced”
 - Religion & spirituality
 - Economic, social & political change, etc., etc., etc.

Question:

What made the idea of evolution so incredibly popular in the late-19th century?

Disappointments and Consolations

- To understand the extraordinary hold of the idea of evolution on the late-19th century imagination, we need to recognize that this idea held both acute disappointments and tantalizing consolations for many people.

First, what were some of the disappointments?

Disappointments

- The retreat of Providence
 - *Where was the evidence of Providential design in nature?*
- The problem of purpose
 - *What were people to make of the apparent blindness and aimlessness of Darwinian evolution?*
- The problem of suffering
 - *What were people to make of the wanton cruelty and suffering that appeared to be the price of evolutionary change?*

Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1849)

*“Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;*

*‘So careful of the type?’ but no.
From scarp’d cliff and quarried stone
She cries, ‘A thousand types are
gone:*

I care for nothing, all shall go.”



Consolations

- The retreat of Providence
 - For some, casting off the shackles of dogmatic theology was liberating
- The advance of natural law
 - For some, the prospect of understanding the natural laws governing human life was empowering
- The prospect of progress
 - For many, evolution held the promise that, despite all waste and suffering, *nature was on the side of progress*

An idea for the times

- Evolution resonated with all sorts of anxieties, hopes and expectations in the late-Victorian period
- For many, it came to embody *the promise of progress* – albeit at a price that for many was uncomfortable.
- In this sense, evolution was an idea for the times

But what sort of times were they?

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."



Charles Dickens
A Tale of Two
Cities
(1859)

The best of times?



The worst of times?



QUESTION

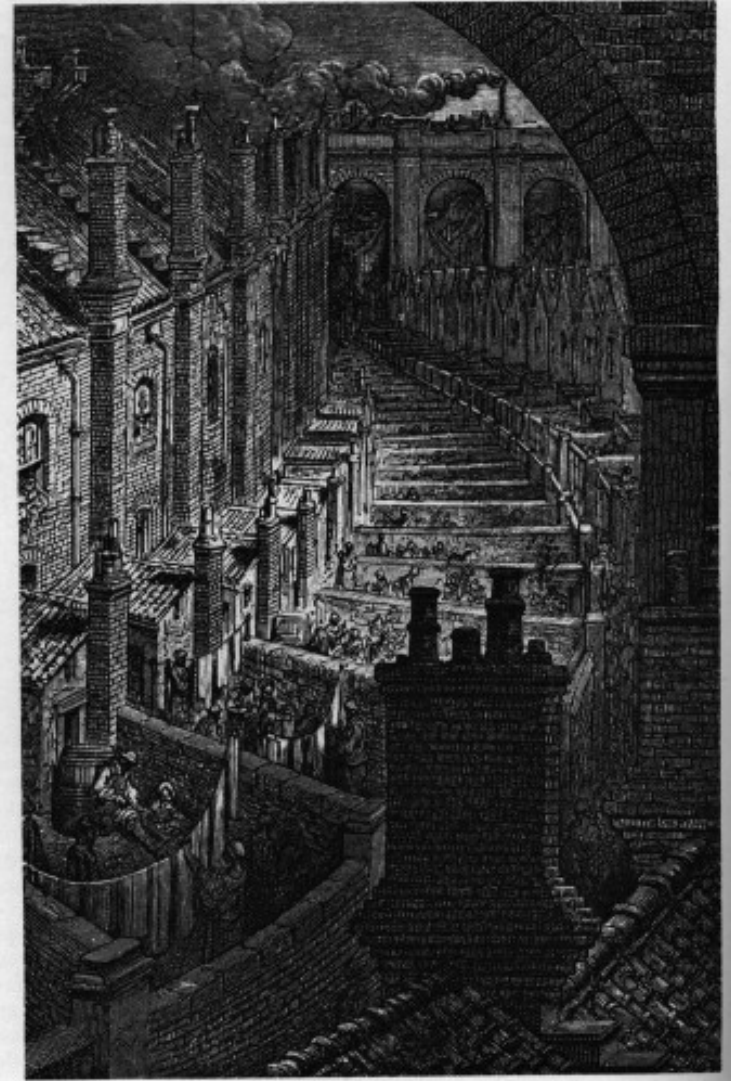
- *Why were things so bad for so many?*

ANSWER

- Ironically, for the same reason things were so good for so many...
- *...rapid industrialization & new forms of capitalism*

Industrialization

- Great increase in population
- Great increase in (aggregate) national wealth
- Mass migration into cities
- Shift of wealth & influence from landed aristocracy to capitalist entrepreneurs
- Rise of middle and working classes
- Periodic oversupply of workers, low wages & unemployment
- Growing numbers of people in poverty (10% of population paupers in 1840)

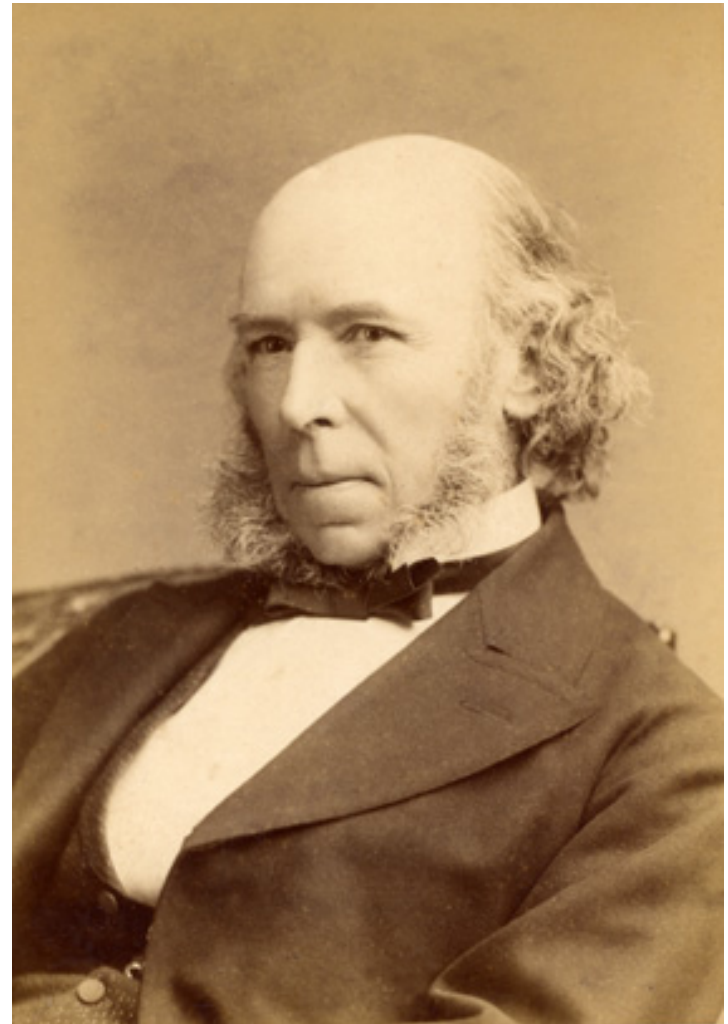


How to make sense of it all?

- These times produced their own, highly distinctive philosopher
- Drawing on multiple influences – Malthus, Lamarck, the Vestiges...and, in due course, Darwin himself – this man crystallized a comprehensive evolutionary philosophy that spoke to many people's daily experience.
- He became the only philosopher in the English-speaking world ever to sell > 1 million copies of his books in his life-time

Herbert Spencer, 1820–1903

- In the 1850s & 1860s, Spencer developed a truly comprehensive evolutionary philosophy
- This was simultaneously a *natural philosophy* and a *political philosophy*
- It was codified in his monumental *System of Synthetic Philosophy* (10 volumes, from 1862)



Spencer's natural philosophy

- There is one set of universal natural laws, the most basic of which is the law of evolution
- These laws generate endless progress, so long as we don't interfere with them

Spencer's political philosophy

- The rise of industrial capitalism is an expression in society of the universal law of evolution
- It is the State's sole duty to facilitate the free operation of this law.

For Spencer, social progress is underwritten by evolution

“Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial it is a part of nature, all of a piece with the development of an embryo or the unfolding of a flower.”

Spencer, Social Statics, 1851

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Practical pay-off

- “Laissez-faire” (literally, “leave it alone”)
- If nature is on the side of social progress, then our best bet for a brighter tomorrow is not to interfere with the free operation of natural laws in society
- So....

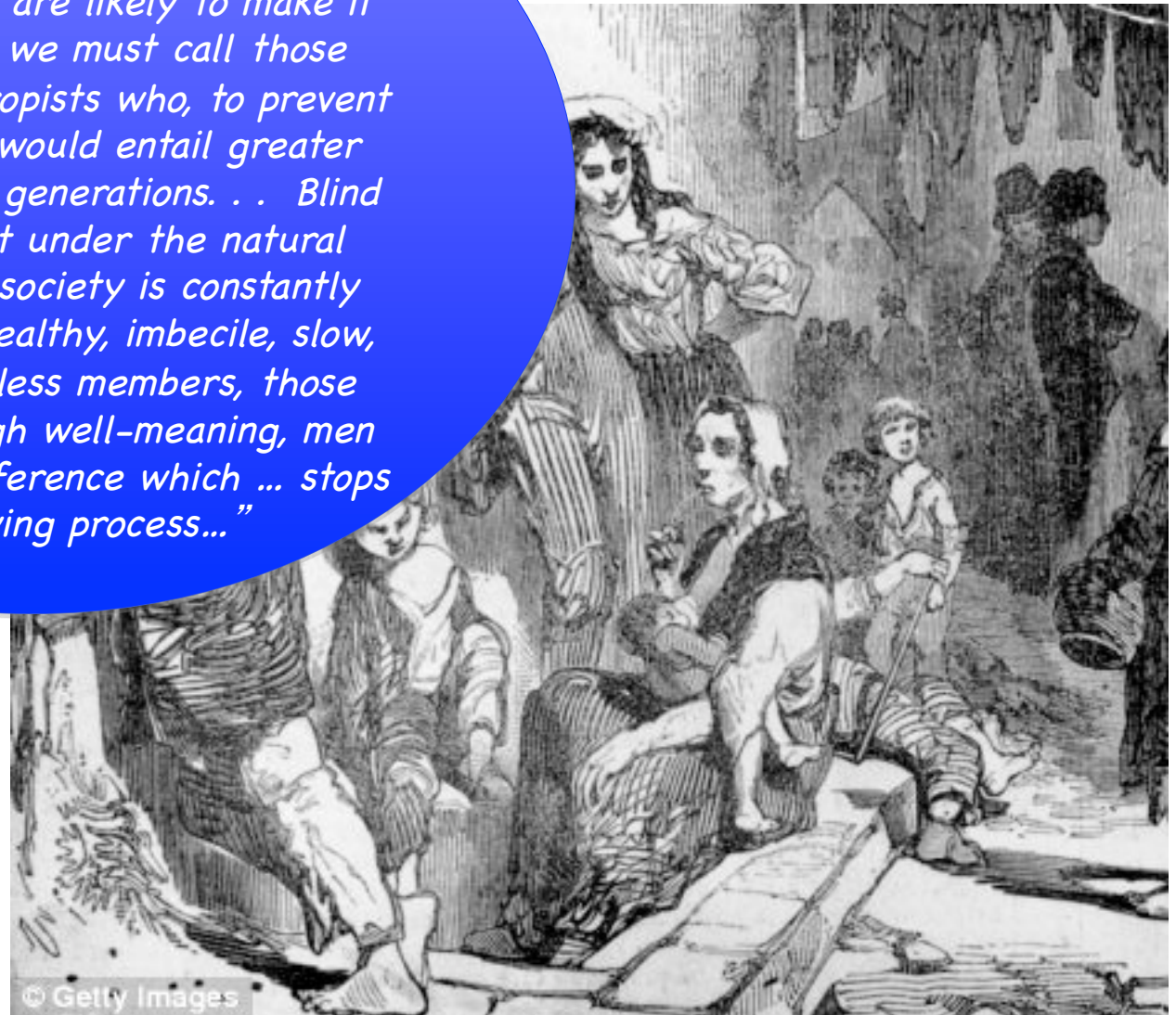
...Spencer opposed lots of things

- poor laws that provided charity to the destitute
- state-supported education
- public health reform and sanitary regulations
- laws to regulate business, including the sale of dangerous quack medicines
- compulsory vaccination
- in fact, anything that interfered with the free exercise of all of men's faculties.



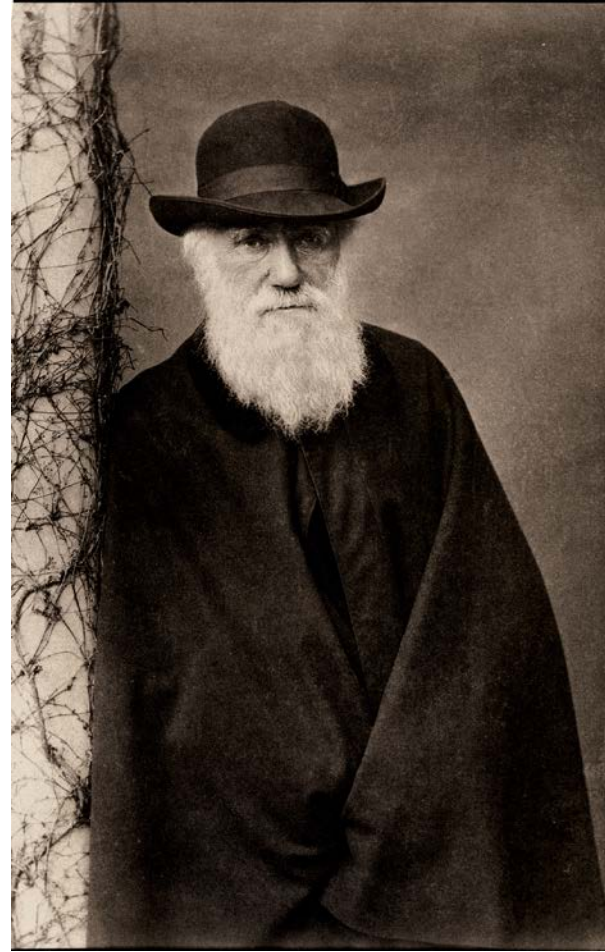
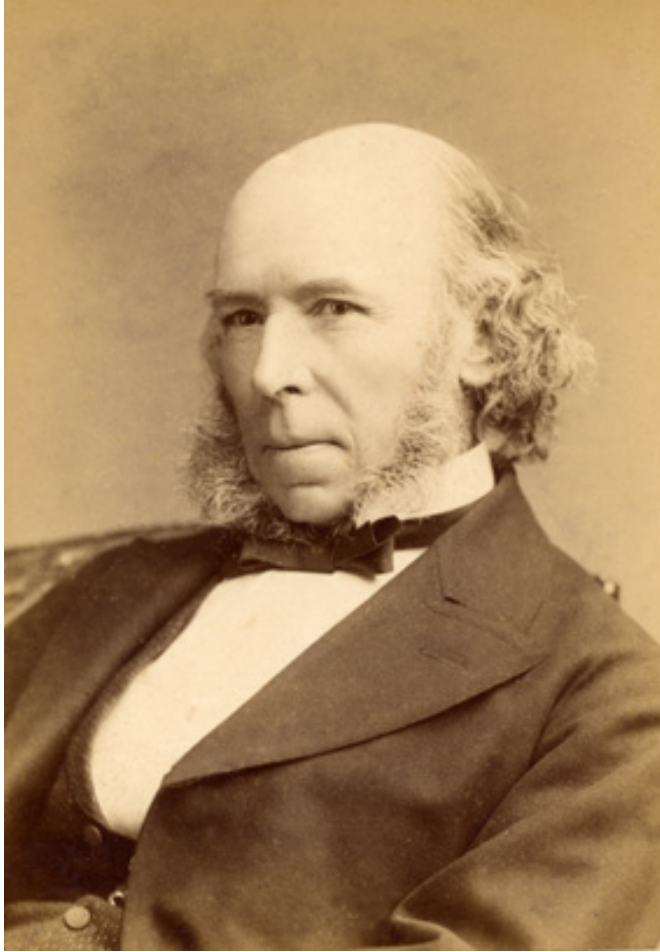
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“We do not consider it true kindness in a mother to gratify her child with sweetmeats that are likely to make it ill. . . Similarly, we must call those spurious philanthropists who, to prevent present misery, would entail greater misery on future generations. . . Blind to the fact that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members, those unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which ... stops the purifying process...”



© Getty Images

Spencer, Darwin and “Social Darwinism”



Darwin and progress

*”As all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Silurian epoch, we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards **perfection.**”*

Darwin, *Origin of Species*, penultimate paragraph

But what kind of progress is this?

“I have received, in a Manchester newspaper, rather a good squib, showing that I have proved “might is right,” and therefore that Napoleon is right, and every cheating tradesman is also right.”

Darwin, Letter to W.B. Carpenter, 1860

“Social Darwinism”: What’s in a phrase?

- A widely used and almost exclusively pejorative term for attempts to apply ideas of struggle and “survival of the fittest” to justify particular ideologies in the late-19th century
- Ironically, the term is most closely associated with Darwin but arguably owes most to Spencer
- Core idea: struggle is a virtuous process in which “fitter” individuals (or groups) survive at the expense of “less fit” ones

“Social Darwinism” comes to the U.S.

- Darwin and Spencer were both lionized in the United States in the years after the Civil War.
- Many American writers and business leaders developed forms of “social Darwinism”, usually under the influence of both men
- Key figures from world of letters include:
 - John Fiske, William Graham Sumner
- Key figures from world of business include some of the leading so-called “robber barons”
 - Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller

John Fiske, 1842-1901

- American philosopher & historian; lecturer, Librarian & overseer at Harvard
- Study of history led him to Darwin and Spencer; he became an important exponent of their views in the U.S.



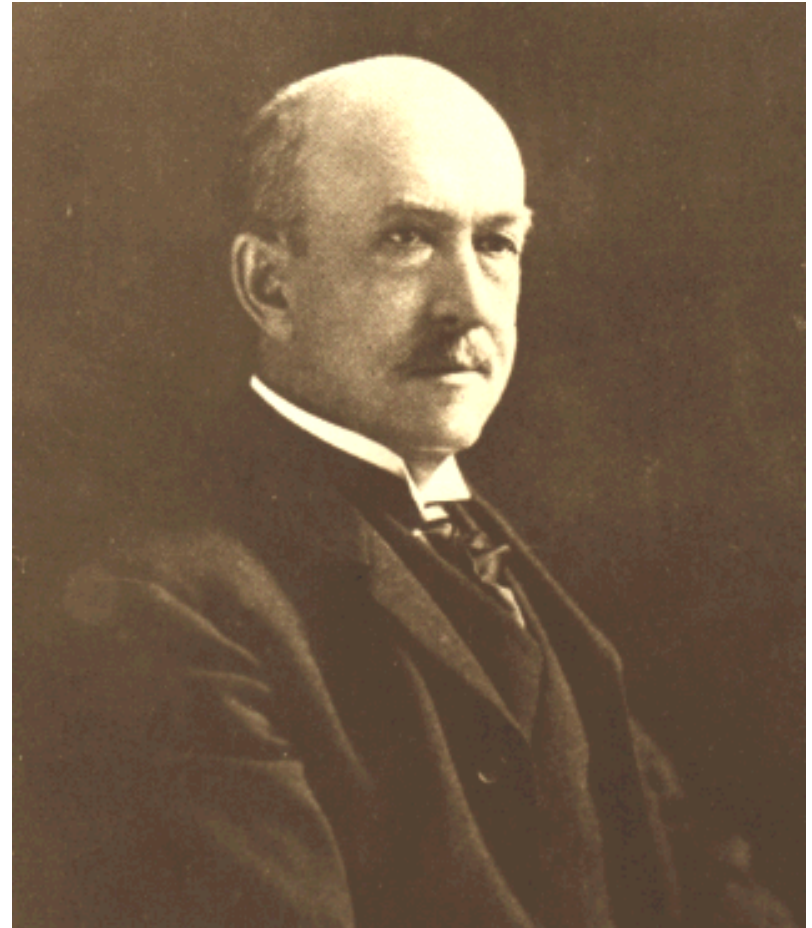
Spencer's disciple

“The doctrine of evolution asserts, as the widest and deepest truth which the study of nature can disclose to us, that there exists a power to which no limit in time or space is conceivable, and that all the phenomena of the universe, whether they be what we call material or what we call spiritual phenomena, are manifestations of this infinite and eternal Power...”

“Does this eternal Power, then, work for righteousness? ...Are the principles of right living really connected with the intimate constitution of the universe? Now, science began to return a decisively affirmative answer to such questions as these when it began, with Mr. Spencer, to explain moral beliefs and moral sentiments as products of evolution.”

William Graham Sumner, 1840-1910

- American sociologist, professor at Yale
- Influential teacher & writer
- Heavily influenced by Spencer
- In 1875, became the first person in the English-speaking world to teach a course on “Sociology”



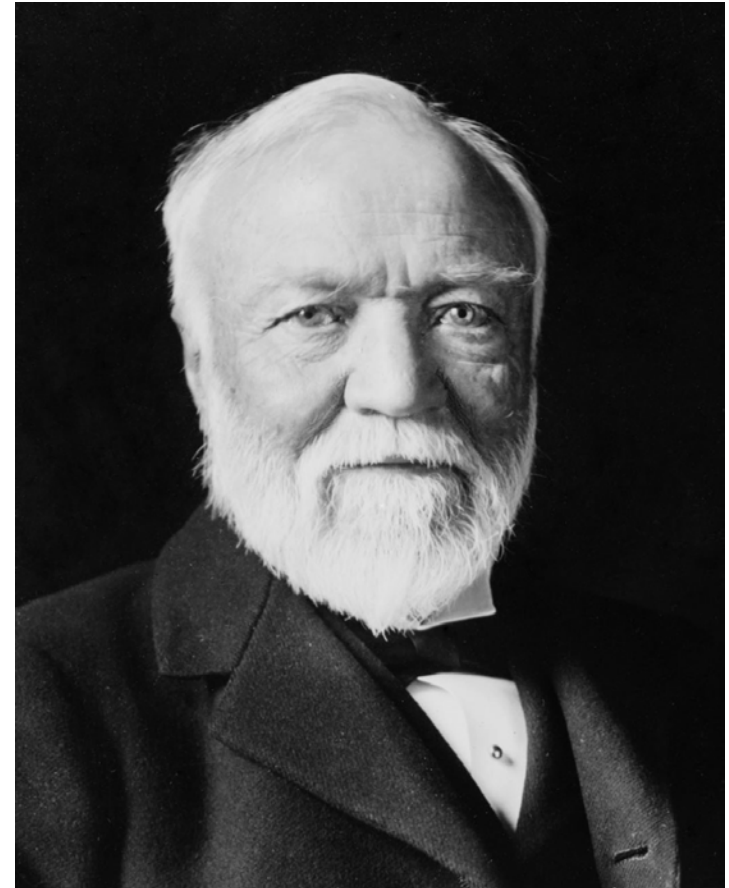
Sumner as a “Social Darwinist”

- Individuals struggle for existence in society
- The superior reap rewards, the inferior suffer
- Efforts to mitigate the struggle for existence lead to societal regression

“A drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be, according to the fitness and tendency of things. Nature has set upon him the process of decline and dissolution by which she removes things which have survived their usefulness.”

Andrew Carnegie, 1835-1919

- Scottish-American industrialist (*U.S. Steel*), who became the richest man in the world
- Work of Darwin and – especially – Spencer was decisive in his move to accepting what he came to define as the responsibilities of great wealth

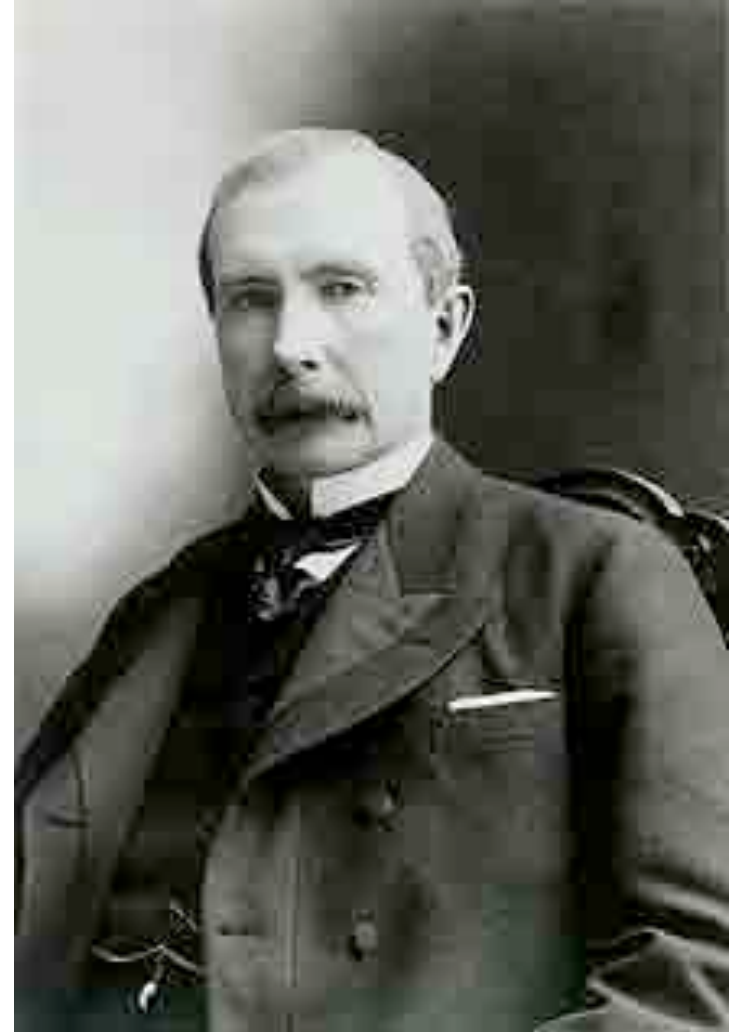


Carnegie read Spencer and had a conversion experience

"I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear....Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution. 'All is well since all grows better' became my motto, my true source of comfort."

John D. Rockefeller, 1839–1937

- Oil magnate, founder of *Standard Oil*
- Founder of modern philanthropy
- Became the world's richest man, and the first American to be worth more than \$1 billion



Rockefeller as a “Social Darwinist”

“The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest, the working out of a law of nature and a law of God.”



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Critiques of “Social Darwinism”

- The use of evolution to support laissez-faire politics did not go unchallenged.
- Many liberals and socialists looked to apply ideas of struggle and selection to society in a variety of different ways.
- The early communists simultaneously criticized the re-importation of Malthusian ideas from natural history into economics and looked to Darwin for scientific validation of their ideology.

Summary

- In the late-19th century, the “gospel of evolution” seemed to sweep all before it
- In this process, Herbert Spencer was at least as influential as Darwin
- A mix of Spencerian and Darwinian ideas was often held to contain the key to an understanding of both nature and society

Coming up on Wednesday...

- Critics of “Social Darwinism” in the late-19th century
- *Please read before class and come prepared to discuss the extract from Thomas Huxley’s famous lecture on “Evolution and Ethics”*

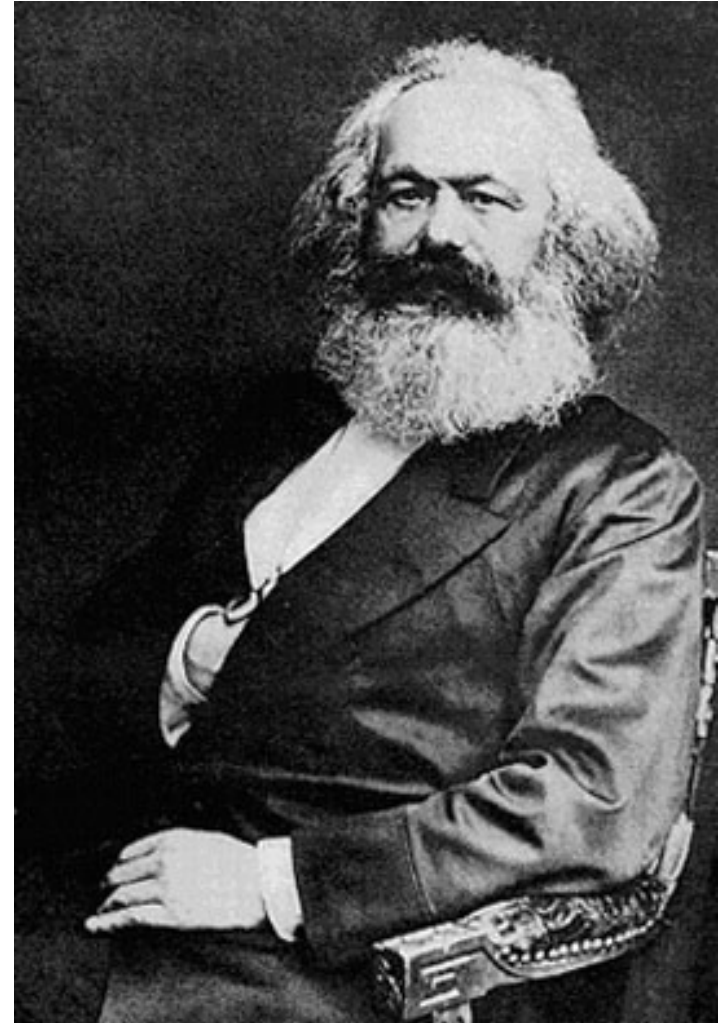
Friedrich Engels, 1820–1895

- Wrote *The Condition of of the Working Class in England*, 1844
- “Darwin did not know what a bitter satire he wrote on mankind, and especially on his countrymen, when he showed that free competition, the struggle for existence, which the economists celebrate as the highest historical achievement, is the normal state of the Animal Kingdom.”



Karl Marx, 1818-1883

- Radical economist and political philosopher
- Collaborated with Engels in writing *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)
- *“Darwin’s work is most important and suits my purpose in that it provides a basis in natural science for the historical class struggle.”*



Peter Kropotkin, 1842–1921

- Zoologist, evolutionist and communist
- Author of *Mutual Aid: A factor of evolution*, 1902
- *“In the animal world we have seen that the vast majority of species live in societies, and that they find in association the best arms for the struggle for life....The unsociable species, on the contrary, are doomed to decay.”*



Huxley draws a line in the sand

While capitalists, communists & others squabbled about the correct moral, social and political lessons to be drawn from the idea of evolution, Huxley criticized the whole idea of looking to evolution for moral guidance



“Evolution and Ethics”, 1893

QUESTIONS:

*What was Huxley's
basic argument?*

Is it valid?

So Huxley draws a line in the sand

“Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.”

Coming up in the next class

A very different, parallel set of attempts to draw lessons from the idea of evolution in the late-19th century:

The rise of eugenics

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