Darwinism and American Society

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Darwin’s magnum opus, The Origin of Species, had an immediate and lasting impact on the entire thinking world. To use contemporary terminology, it was a huge game-changer, and it was not long before people were applying its insights in all kinds of ways, and using it to rationalize or justify all sorts of things, including some that would likely have horrified Darwin himself. ‘Darwinism’ came to be conflated with ‘survival of the fittest’, even though Darwin himself did not coin the phrase. The Eugenics movement is another example of playing fast and loose with Darwin to buttress the acceptability of a philosophy that might, otherwise, have been met with some moral revulsion (Keas, 2010). This essay seeks to explore the relationship between Christianity and social Darwinism, how Darwinism influenced the immigration policies of America, and how social stratification was justified by social Darwinists and Eugenics.

The entire concept of Eugenics was derived from Darwinism. However, it does not mean that Eugenics was right, because what Darwin described was overwhelmingly right. But the order was definitely that Darwin first and Eugenics later. The horrific “Eugenics” movement holds an ignominious place in American history. With the dawn of the 20th century, Americans began to perceive immigration as a potential threat to what they call “pure American race”. The idea of “Yellow peril” was reinforced following the enactment of the “Chinese Exclusion Act” which would affect the influx of Asian ethnicities on American soil (Larson, 2009).  
 The widespread use of social Darwinism prohibited Afro-Americans and other European ethnicities from having equal opportunities in economic, social and political spheres. Not only did science affect the public policies as it grew by leaps and bounds, but also shaped public opinion. Social Darwinism rendered scientific racism and allowed people having economic and political power for exploiting minorities. Legal segregation in southern states of America following Jim Crow laws systemized a “separate but equal” status that yielded social, economic, and educational disadvantages for Afro-Americans (Dixon, 2009)

For the Social Darwinist, colonialism and imperialism are justified under the premise of ‘might makes right’. The colonizers have developed a culture—through a combination of geography, opportunity, ability, and pure providence—that has led to a dramatic evolution in how said culture operates. One only need to look at how the British Empire exploded in power from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the Great War itself. By a subtle combination of enlightenment ideals, industrial development, increased military power, and more dominating ideals in how the world should be run, Britain was able to rule 10,000,000 square miles (26,000,000 square km) of territory that encompassed over 400 million people into the administration of the Empire.

Social Darwinism, sans the more contemptible racial and Eugenics aspects, holds firm to a time-tested maxim of history: might makes right. Stronger cultures will dominate the weaker ones, this is a simple reality (Keas, 2010). It is up to the people themselves to change their own culture, their own societies into competitive ones in an era of globalization. To do otherwise is to invite subjugation and oppression from others and paves the way to an eventual path towards extinction.

Fundamentalist Christians oppose social Darwinism, for they care about actual people and oppose the ideological deployment of science for pseudo-scientific, anti-human agendas that violate human rights (which are, after all, meant to be at the core of liberal values) (Keas, 2010). What is a more striking question is why self-declared evangelical Christians de facto support social -Darwinist economic systems, such as free-market capitalism, and despise Jesus’ warnings about rich men, camels and the eyes of needless. Most of the people also wonder how the prosperity gospel crowd square their worship of material wealth with Jesus’ explicit statement.

**References**

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