

The Neoliberal Survival Game

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One of the ways the media has shaped the public's attitude concerning the distribution of wealth and power in our society, has been by the dissemination of a familiar but menacing ideology, an ideology which teaches that human success and failure is determined by evolutionary fitness—'the survival of the fittest' ethic [also known as 'Social Darwinism.']



This idea sprang from dangerous interpretations of Darwin's writings, peaked in the age of eugenics and Hitler, and remains to this day in our consciousness because of the language and constructs we continue to use.

And it lives on not simply because it has been passed on over the years through the interactions of citizens, but because versions of it have been repeatedly parroted by powerful voices, regurgitated throughout our culture, and absorbed into the American psyche.

Little time can pass before one hears or sees the phrase 'survival of the fittest' in the media, and in these spaces which largely escape the critical eye of the scientific community, it's easy to get away with representing evolution inaccurately.

Defenders of this language might say that it describes the evolutionary mechanism called natural selection and that "fittest" just means the organism best suited to its environment—that can even mean an organism that is weaker or has a shorter lifespan.

But when this concept is used in the media it is often used in a way which expresses that what exists should exist (implying superiority), and that natural selection is the only mechanism or driving force of evolution. Both of these assumptions are false.

And these perpetuated myths about evolution dramatically affect how Americans view their world.

By associating success (e.g. physical, emotional, financial, etc.) with evolutionary value, this ideology ignores historical structures of power and inequality and distorts the public's understanding of their true conditions.

When people come to believe individuals' conditions are determined solely by their genetics, or by how hard they fight to survive, impoverished people are seen as lacking the abilities or motivation to reach a privileged place in society, while privileged people are seen as having the abilities which brought them their success.

The origin and history of this phrase, which understandably misleads people, explains why there is this deep-seeded psychological inclination to equate "fittest" to the best.

The phrase is often and incorrectly attributed to the father of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin, and though Darwin did use this language later in his life, the phrase was actually coined by Herbert Spencer—an English philosopher, sociologist, and social Darwinism's most enthusiastic proponent.

Spencer believed that Darwin's biologic theory of evolution could be applied to society, arguing that social transformation was a progressive process leading to more perfect human beings and social formations. He claimed that if people should struggle or die because of their conditions, it was because they were not biologically fit enough to achieve a better position in life.

"The whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better ... If they are sufficiently complete to live, they do live, and it is well they should live. If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die" [10].

He used this system of thought to theorize about the evolutionary benefits of warfare and to justify a laissez faire approach to the economy as well.

Prominent American philosophers, theologians, scientists, and politicians espoused and popularized Spencer's ideas. Andrew Carnegie, who at the time was the richest man in America, and Edward Youmans, the founder of the magazine *Popular Science*, were among his American admirers. "Successful business entrepreneurs apparently accepted almost by instinct the Darwinian terminology which seemed to portray the conditions of their existence." [6]

Countless instances of social Darwinist messaging can still be observed in our media. Publications like *The Economist* (where Spencer was once an editor), *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, provide examples of this.

David Brown, a physician and staff writer for *The Washington Post*, wrote an article titled "Darwin's Advice to Hillary," in which he argued universal healthcare was a threat to the evolution of humans. "Bill Clinton should have studied Darwin before he proposed a health system that would guarantee medical care for every person for their entire lives" wrote Brown. "Crucial to [Darwin's] theory is that losers are as essential as winners on the road to robust, well-adapted populations. The 'sacrifice' of the maladapted fuels the engine of evolution just as much as the victory of the fit."

Matt Ridley's 2012 article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Does Survival of the Sexiest Explain Civilization?" is another example. In it he argues men who engage in "conspicuous consumption" have more opportunities for mating, and therefore financial privilege is resented by those who cannot consume in this way because of reproductive competition. "They [the less privileged] dislike

(and envy) conspicuous consumption, even if it impinges on them not at all. What hurts is not that somebody is rich, but that he is richer. This is a classic statement of sexual selection.”

It is worth pointing out that Ridley is the grandson of Earls (members of British society who enjoy the social position right below royalty) and the former Chairman to Northern Rock bank, which was nationalized after collapsing during the financial crisis. He wrote the article after the banking system failed, when citizens’ discontent over staggering wealth disparity should not have been a mystery to him, only explained by reproductive competition.

Richard Dawkins is another media figure who misapplies Darwin’s theory, but unlike Ridley and Brown—who only write about science—Dawkins is a scientist, and a well known one at that. Dawkins is the author of a very popular book called *The Selfish Gene*, in which he argues for a gene-centered view of evolution, explaining that our genes simply self-replicate and act in ways that make them proliferate. He too maintains that Darwin’s theories can be applied to the social sciences and has played a significant role in promoting this belief [4].

What is curious about the sizeable platform given to Dawkins to speak on the topic of evolution is that it is not explained by his reputation in the evolutionary science community. “Other than those who profited from Dawkins’ popularization of their ideas, most leading evolutionary biologists, particularly Stephen Jay Gould, Niles Eldredge, Richard Lewontin, Ernst Mayr, Carl Woese, Freeman Dyson, and Stuart Kauffman, were unreceptive to Dawkins’ ideas.” [4]

Dawkins’ status in mainstream culture is largely due to the attention he received from the British television documentaries he co-created, such as “*The Genius of Charles Darwin*”, wherein he confronts people who challenge Darwin’s theories, and due to the time he spent as Oxford’s Chair for the Public Understanding of Science, a position that was specifically created for him by billionaire Charles Simonyi [9].

It would seem, given the confidence with which the Darwinist message is delivered and the extent to which it is disseminated, that there exists little uncertainty surrounding our scientific theory of life. Yet over the course of the last several decades, science has revealed more about how organisms change, showing us that uncertainties do exist and that we should continue to seek answers.

Carl Woese, the American microbiologist who is said to have been the most important evolution scientist of the twentieth century, stated in an interview before he died that he had not yet managed to overthrow “the hegemony of the culture of Darwin” [7].

Yet Woese made several profound contributions to science that reshaped our understanding of evolution. Along with Nigel Goldenfeld, the director of the NASA Astrobiology Institute for Universal Biology, he showed overwhelming evidence for horizontal gene transfer (HGT). In contrast to Darwin’s vertical gene transfer—the transfer of genetic material between parent and offspring—HGT is the transfer of genetic material between nearby organisms.

There have since been numerous genome studies proving that DNA indeed flows between the chromosomes of microbes and the external world. This has even been demonstrated in multicellular organisms. Studies of the genomes of various animals—such as frogs, lizards, mice, and bushbabies—have shown that segments of their DNA were in fact acquired horizontally. [2]

Another scientific development that is challenging the linear model of evolution is the new field of epigenetics, or “soft inheritance”. Epigenetics is the study of changes in gene activity that are passed on to successive generations, and more and more studies are suggesting that offspring not

only inherit their parents DNA, but they can also inherit changes to their parents' gene activity which occurred during their parents' lives.

Dr. Michael Skinner demonstrated this in a 2005 study in which he exposed a pregnant rat to reproduction-impairing chemicals, resulting in fertility problems in the next three generations of offspring. He showed that this inheritance was "soft" rather than "hard" because the DNA sequence of the genes remained the same. [3]

Given these developments social scientists and science writers should not be relying on the oversimplified model of evolution that Darwinism has proven to be. We see that the transformation of life is a dynamic phenomenon that involves the complex interaction between organisms and their environment, and that the vertical transfer of genetic material is only a piece of the puzzle of evolution.

"Our task now," argued Woese, "is to resynthesize biology; put the organism back into its environment; connect it again to its evolutionary past; and let us feel that complex flow that is organism, evolution, and environment united. The time has come for biology to enter the nonlinear world." [7]

So let us reject this "survival of the fittest" language, and this social Darwinist narrative that proposes we ignore disparity in health and resources and let 'nature' or the 'free market' sort things out. That is a cruel, illogical ideology that only benefits those who hold a privileged place in society and want to maintain power over others.

Notes.

[1] Brown, David. "Darwin's Advice to Hillary." The Washington Post. WP Company, 11 Sept. 1994. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.

[2] Buchanan, Mark. "Horizontal and Vertical: The Evolution of Evolution." New Scientist. Reed Business Information Ltd, 20 Jan. 2010. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.

[3] Chopra, Deepak, and Rudolph E. Tanzi. Super Genes: the Hidden Key to Total Well-Being. Harmony Books, 2015.

[4] Gabora, Liane. "How a Generation Was Misled About Natural Selection." Psychology Today. Sussex Publishers LLC, 7 May 2011. Web.

[5] "History & Rules." Darwin Awards. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.

[6] Hofstadter, Richard. Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945.

[7] Mazur, Suzan. "Evolution Scientist Carl Woese Dies: 'The Most Important Evolution Scientist of the 20th Century'." The Huffington Post.

[8] Ridley, Matt. "Does Survival of the Sexiest Explain Civilization?" The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, 16 Nov. 2012. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.

[9] Segal, Lynne. Culture in Psychology. Taylor & Francis Inc., 2000.

[10] Spencer, Herbert. Social Statics. D. Appleton & Company, 1892.

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-3035.html>