



Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Social Darwinism: Justified or Not?

The following activity asks you to evaluate the theory of Social Darwinism. Read the activity and think carefully about the questions it asks. Write down your answers in the space provided or on a separate piece of paper. You may discuss the questions and your answers with your classmates. Be sure to answer all parts of each question.

Although economic interests spurred the rush of expansion, other factors caused it as well. Many people, including Teddy Roosevelt, believed in America's duty to "elevate uncivilized peoples." European powers claimed the same duty as they colonized Africa and Asia. Others pointed to the theoretical work of Charles Darwin to justify the cause of imperialism.

As a young man, Charles Darwin joined a British scientific expedition aboard the H.M.S. *Beagle*. As the *Beagle* journeyed around the world, Darwin collected specimens of plants and animals. He found fossils of extinct animals that resembled living animals, and he noticed many variations within the same species. After returning from his voyage, Darwin spent twenty years studying his specimens. In 1859 Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species by the Means of Natural Selection*, a book that explained his new theory.

In his theory of natural selection, Darwin made the following observations:

1. The resources of an environment are limited. Creatures produce more offspring than can possibly survive. Members of a species must compete for limited resources and for survival.
2. No two members of a species are exactly alike. Each organism contains an individual combination of inherited traits. Some traits are useful for survival; other traits are not.
3. Organisms that have useful traits reproduce in greater numbers. Their offspring inherit the traits. Organisms with unfavorable traits eventually die off. The fittest survive.
4. Nature selects different traits at different times. Varieties within a species gradually create a new species.

The publication of this theory started a sensational controversy. Many writers applied Darwin's theory to sociology (The study of human social behavior and society). They developed a controversial theory called Social Darwinism. Many people, from Karl Marx Herbert Spencer to Adolf Hitler, employed Social Darwinism in their arguments and for reasons to justify their views and how societies should be governed and how people should live. How can people with vastly different viewpoints use the same argument to defend their views? You will explore that question on the following pages.

