

# WHAT IS SOCIAL DARWINISM?

In 1859, English naturalist and geologist, Charles Darwin, published his theory of evolution and natural selection in the work, *On The Origin of Species*. This theory argued that all species of life have descended over time from common ancestors and further explained that this evolution resulted from a process that he called natural selection, in which a species will either adapt to changes in their environments and survive as a species, or a species will fail to adapt to environmental changes and eventually go extinct.

In the 1860s and 1870s, as word of Darwin's theory of natural selection spread in the Western world, some philosophers and scientists made new interpretations of his ideas. One of these philosophers and scientists was fellow Englishman Herbert Spencer. Herbert Spencer promoted the theory of Social Darwinism.

Social Darwinism is an application of the theory of natural selection to social, political, and economic issues. In its simplest form, Social Darwinism follows the basic idea of "the strong survive." Social Darwinism, in the hands of Westerners, was used to promote the idea that the white European race was superior to others, and therefore, destined to rule over them.

In the mind of a Social Darwinist, "Some groups of people survive and compete better than others. The struggle leads to human progress. Some groups advance human progress more than others."

At the time that Spencer began to promote Social Darwinism, the technology, economy, and government of the "White European" was viewed by Westerners as far advanced in comparison to that of other cultures around the world. Looking at this apparent advantage, as well as the economic and military structures of the West, some argued that natural selection was playing out and that the race more suited to survival was indeed surviving.

At its worst, the implications of Social Darwinism were used later as scientific justification for the Holocaust. The fascist Nazi Party claimed that the murder of Jews in World War II was an example of cleaning out the inferior genetics. Many philosophers noted evolutionary echoes in Hitler's march to exterminate an entire race of people. Various other dictators and criminals have claimed the cause of Social Darwinism in carrying out their acts. Even without such actions, Social Darwinism has proven to be a false and dangerous interpretation of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory.

Scientists and evolutionists maintain that this Social Darwinist interpretation is only loosely based on Darwin's theory of natural selection. They will admit to an obvious parallel between Darwin's theory of natural selection and Spencer's beliefs. In nature, the strong survive and those best suited to survival will out-live the weak. According to Social Darwinism, those societies with strength (economic, physical, technological) flourish and those without are destined to be conquered and controlled, or perhaps go extinct.



1. How did Herbert Spencer "hijack" Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection?
2. How might Western imperialists have made use of Social Darwinism?
3. By 1900, what could Westerners who believed in Social Darwinism use as evidence to prove that they were superior to non-Westerners?

## Document 1

Source: Cecil Rhodes, a British businessman in 1877

“I contend that we British are the first race in the world, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race....It is our duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and we should keep this one idea steadily before our eyes: that more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon [British] race, more of the best, the most human, most honourable race the world possesses.”

How does this document follow the ideas set forth in Social Darwinism?

How can this document be argued against based upon our previous discussions about race?

Why would the Cecil Rhodes make these statements regarding the British?