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Science, Morality, and Inequality: Rethinking Social Darwinism in Gilded Age America

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Abstract. Social Darwinism in the Gilded Age in America attempts to interpret social order through evolutionary science. Classical interpretations, most notably Hofstadter, have understood Social Darwinism as an ideology that justified capitalism and social inequality. Revisionist scholarship has complicated this view by questioning the coherence of social Darwinism as a category, and by showing that evolutionary language was politically flexible and not confined to conservative defense of capitalism. Building on those debates, this paper argues that the significance of social Darwinism lay not only in the sophisticated ideologies that it supported, but in the authority that evolutionary language acquired when applied to social life. By reviewing classical and revisionist scholarship alongside examples of Gilded Age evolutionary language, this paper shows how Social Darwinist reasoning naturalized inequalities, moralize competition, and limited arguments for collective responsibilities. Its contribution is to shift attention from what Social Darwinism justified to how scientific discourse made those justifications persuasive.

Keywords: Social Darwinism, Evolutionary discourse, Scientific authority, Gilded Age America, Historical review

1. Introduction

Gilded Age America witnessed rapid industrialization, urbanization, and consolidation of capitalist enterprise. While these developments produced significant economic growth, they also intensified social inequality, labor unrest, and poverty, prompting sustained debate over the obligations of wealth, the role of government, and the boundaries of social responsibility. At the same time, Darwinian and evolutionary theories spread widely across Europe and the United States. Scientific discourse increasingly extended beyond the natural sciences, providing a framework through which questions of social order, competition, progress, and human difference could be interpreted.

Within this intellectual and social context, Social Darwinism has frequently been identified as a central ideological language of the period. Following Richard Hofstadter's influential interpretation, historians have often linked Social Darwinism to the defense of laissez-faire capitalism, the valorization of economic competition, resistance to state intervention, and the justification of social inequality [1]. In this reading, evolutionary concepts such as "survival of the fittest," "fitness," "adaptation," and "natural law" were mobilized to confer scientific legitimacy upon existing social hierarchies and economic disparities. Subsequent scholarship, however, has complicated this

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framework. Revisionist historians have questioned the coherence of Social Darwinism as a unified doctrine, as well as its prevalence among business elites and conservative thinkers. Moreover, they have demonstrated that evolutionary language was not exclusively deployed in support of laissez-faire principles but was also invoked by reformers and advocates of state intervention [2, 3]. These interventions underscore the need to approach Social Darwinism not as a fixed or monolithic ideology, nor as a straightforward extension of Darwinian biology into the social realm.

The central contention advanced here is that the influence of Social Darwinism derived not solely from its defense of competitive individualism, but from its capacity to draw upon the authority of science to legitimize social inequality. By representing competition, poverty, and hierarchy as outcomes of evolutionary processes, Social Darwinist discourse recast political and moral claims as objective and inevitable. In doing so, it encouraged interpretations of inequality as an expression of natural law rather than as the product of contingent social arrangements or political decisions. Through a critical synthesis of existing scholarship, this paper therefore reconsiders Social Darwinism both as a historiographical construct and as a mode of moral reasoning grounded in scientific authority. It argues that its significance in Gilded Age America lay not only in its economic implications, but in its ability to naturalize inequality, moralize competition, and circumscribe arguments for collective responsibility and governmental intervention. The analysis proceeds by first reviewing classical and revisionist interpretations of Social Darwinism, before examining the emergence of scientific authority and its implications for debates over competition, poverty, and the role of the state.

2. Historiographical review: from classical interpretation to revisionist debate

2.1. The classical interpretation: Social Darwinism as Laissez-faire ideology

The classical and most influential interpretations of Social Darwinism were established by Richard Hofstadter in his book Social Darwinism in American Thought. Hofstadter presents Social Darwinism as an ideology closely associated with the conservative political environment of the Gilded Age and the flourishing of Laissez-faire capitalism. In his account, thinkers such as Spencer and Sumner applied evolutionary ideas to their political ideas. They equated the competition in our natural world with the competition in the capitalist economy [1]. For example, Hofstadter indicates that the terms used in Darwin's ideas to explain evolution were applied to the Laissez-faire capitalist economy to justify their competitive struggle, as evolutionary concepts were interpreted as giving scientific legitimacy. Hence, Hofstadter's arguments rest on this claim that Darwinist language gives new authority to older ideas about competition, suggesting that inequality was presented as a natural law rather than a result of social institutions:

"The most popular catchwords of Darwinism, "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest," when applied to the life of man in society, suggested that nature would provide that the best competitors in a competitive situation would win, and that this process would lead to continuing improvement. In itself this was not a new idea, as economists could have pointed out, but it did give the force of a natural law to the idea of competitive struggle."

Although Hofstadter primarily emphasized the relationship between Social Darwinism and laissez-faire capitalism, later scholarship extended this framework by examining how evolutionary language could legitimize broader forms of hierarchy. Paul, for example, links Social Darwinist reasoning to the emergence of eugenic thought, especially the fear that the "unfit" might outbreed the "fit." [2] In this context, evolutionary ideas encouraged arguments for the artificial selection of human populations and gave biological language to claims about superiority, degeneration, and

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social improvement. Such interpretations remain close to the classical framework because they treat Social Darwinism primarily as a language for legitimizing hierarchy and exclusion, even when the hierarchy in question extends beyond the market.

2.2. Revisionist challenges: a contested and retrospective category

Recent historians have challenged classical interpretations by questioning whether "Social Darwinism" existed as a coherent doctrine in the form suggested by Hofstadter. Thomas Leonard is especially important in this revisionist debate. He argues that Hofstadter's account gave the term "Social Darwinism" a historical coherence and influence that it did not necessarily possess among Gilded Age actors themselves. Drawing on Geoffrey Hodgson's bibliometric analysis, Leonard notes that the term became common only after the publication of Social Darwinism in American Thought in 1943 [3].

" Hodgson's (2004) bibliometric analysis identified a mere eleven instances of "social Darwinism" in the Anglophone literature (as represented by the JSTOR database) before 1916. Before 1916 "social Darwinism" had almost no currency whatsoever, so it was, essentially, an anachronism as used by Hofstadter in SDAT. "Social Darwinism" did not acquire much greater currency between 1916 and 1943; a mere 49 articles and reviews employ the term. Following the publication of SDAT, however, "social Darwinism" goes from obscure to commonplace: there are 4258 citations from 1944 to the present."

The significance of this evidence is not that evolutionary language was absent from Gilded Age political thought. Rather, it suggests that "Social Darwinism" was not a clearly defined contemporary movement, but a retrospective category through which later historians organized a diverse set of arguments. Leonard's critique therefore complicates the assumption that Social Darwinism can be treated simply as a conservative doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism. Spencer and Sumner remain important figures, but their later reputation as archetypal Social Darwinists should be understood as part of a historiographical construction rather than as straightforward evidence of a unified movement [3]. Paul develops this revisionist point by emphasizing the political flexibility of Darwinian language. Darwinism did not generate one fixed social ideology; instead, it supplied a vocabulary that different thinkers could attach to competing moral and political projects. As Paul argues:

"Darwin's followers found in his ambiguities legitimization for whatever they favoured: laissez-faire capitalism, certainly, but also liberal reform, anarchism and socialism; colonial conquest, war and patriarchy, but also anti-imperialism, peace and feminism."

This formulation shifts attention away from Social Darwinism as a single doctrine and toward the adaptability of evolutionary discourse. Paul's further claim that "*Darwinism provided a shared scientific vocabulary that allowed both conservatives and reform liberals to reconceptualize society as an object of management through selection principles"* reinforces the same point [2]. Evolutionary language could therefore authorize very different claims because it appeared to draw on the prestige of science, progress, and natural law. Lorenzo Costaguta's work on Darwinism and scientific racialism in the Socialist Labor Party provides a concrete example of this flexibility. His analysis shows that evolutionary language shaped racial debates even within movements formally committed to equality, suggesting that Darwinian and biological reasoning operated outside conservative defense of laissez-faire capitalism [4]. The revisionist challenge, then, is not simply that Hofstadter exaggerated the influence of Social Darwinism, but that evolutionary language was more politically mobile than the classical interpretation allowed.

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2.3. The problem of definition: Darwinism, Spencerianism, and evolutionary language

Revisionist arguments do not make the classical interpretation irrelevant, but they do require a more careful definition of "Social Darwinism." Spencer and Sumner remain important because their writings show how evolutionary vocabulary could be applied to competition, poverty, inequality, and state intervention. Yet they should not be treated as straightforward representatives of a unified Social Darwinist movement. As Leonard argues, Hofstadter's interpretation helped turn figures such as Spencer and Sumner into archetypal Social Darwinists, even though the term itself had limited contemporary currency [3]. The problem, therefore, is not simply whether Social Darwinism existed, but how far historians can use the term without imposing coherence on a body of thought that was historically more fluid.

This definitional difficulty is especially important because the term can be used either too broadly or too narrowly. If used too broadly, almost any social argument that invokes struggle, competition, hierarchy, heredity, or progress risks being labeled Social Darwinist. If used too narrowly, however, it becomes difficult to explain why evolutionary language was so influential in debates over inequality, poverty, reform, and intervention. Leonard's critique is useful here because it challenges the assumption that Social Darwinism simply meant applying "survival of the fittest" to society in defense of laissez-faire capitalism. He instead shows that Progressive reformers also used supposedly scientific and evolutionary ideas to rank groups of people and justify exclusionary policies [3].

The problem is further complicated by the relationship between Darwinism and Spencerianism. In a strict sense, a Darwinian social theory would focus on reproduction, heredity, biological fitness, and the transmission of traits across generations. Much of what historians have called Social Darwinism, however, was not directly Darwinian in this narrow biological sense. It was often Spencerian, or more generally evolutionary, drawing on a vocabulary of "struggle," "natural selection," "competition," "fitness," and "progress" to interpret human society. Spencer's thought was especially important because it connected evolution to social progress, competition, and moral development more directly than Darwin's own theory did [5].

This distinction also helps explain why evolutionary language could not be reduced to one political meaning. Paul's examples of pacifist, feminist, and conservative uses of Darwinism show that the same evolutionary vocabulary could support very different claims. Pacifists could emphasize cooperation in nature, feminists could argue that patriarchy distorted sexual selection, while conservatives could appeal to supposed natural differences between men and women to defend separate social roles [2]. These examples should not all be collapsed into a single definition of Social Darwinism. They show instead that evolutionary language supplied a flexible scientific vocabulary through which different political and moral projects could claim natural authority.

3. Gilded age usage: evolutionary language without a unified movement

In the Gilded Age, evolutionary language circulates within a public culture already preoccupied with industrial growth, market competition, and social hierarchies. Phrases such as "survival of the fittest" and "struggle for survival" appear in journalism, advertisements, and ordinary political discussions. Satirical offers one indication of how familiar associations had become. For example, a satirical account of scientific ethics portrays a Chicago lawyer justifying violence by declaring: *"it was a case of natural selection, a struggle for existence, and the survival of fitness, all demonstrated in a good shape."* The humor depended on the reader recognizing evolutionary phrase understanding their application for social context. In a period marked by competitive individualism,

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this case suggests evolutionary language was already legible as a way of explaining or mocking social struggles [6].

Commercial and industrial usage further shows how evolutionary language fitted the culture of Gilded Age capitalism. Commercial discourse during the Gilded Age also tends to employ natural evolutionary theories when interpreting success and failure of industries and businesses. For example, individuals like John D. Rockefeller referred to "the growth of a large business" as "merely a survival of the fittest." Newspaperman Patrick C. Boyle of the Oil City Derrick also explained to the United States Industrial Commission that the growth and eminence in the oil industry best reflects "Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest," turning out to outcompete others in the industry and possessing the "best element in all branches of the trade." On the other hand, Nathan A. Taylor, an independent tin-plate manufacturer, associated failures in his industry with survival of the fittest [7]. In those commercial contexts, fitness often referred less to moral hierarchies than to practical and economic effectiveness. Evolutionary vocabulary therefore became a part of broader language of improvement, selection, and success in an expanding market society. This movement beyond biology mattered because it made fitness available as a general way of evaluating success and failure. Once the term could be applied to products and business, it could also be extended to people and social groups, allowing economic success to appear as evidence of adaptations where poverty appeared as failure.

Beyond commercial contexts, evolutionary terms could also be used for existing debates over race and political organization. As Joy Hartmann Dike finds, most people before the time when evolutionary theory flourished held two beliefs about different races. The two theories, monogenism and polygenism, differed on whether or not different races were created separately, and both agreed on the inherent separation and hierarchy between different races. While the hierarchy already existed, the addition of evolutionary language allowed new scientific interpretations of the existing racial discrimination. This allowed contemporaries to reinterpret racial hierarchy as a more "authentic" and scientific outcome of evolution [8].

In addition, evolutionary thoughts had not only influenced individuals but also political organizations such as the socialist labor party, which was theoretically committed to equality. Rather than rejecting Darwinism as opposed to socialism, according to Costaguta, Otto-Walster "sought a way to make Darwinism and socialism harmonious." He claimed that socialism demanded equal treatment in order to ensure equal competition and struggle. His effort to defend socialism as compatible with evolutionary theory suggests that it had become an authoritative intellectual framework to which even the competing parties adhered. Moreover, although Walster's claim originated from an anti-bourgeois perspective, his logic was ultimately turned to justify the inequalities within the socialist party. According to Costaguta, during the 1870s and 1880s, the Socialist Labor Party of America "became a site where scientific theories of evolution were regularly deployed to conceptualize and explain racial differences." For instance, Costaguta mentioned that Party members like Grottkau incorporated struggle and developments to the party, and the Socialist, an official organ of the party, proclaimed racial hierarchical ideas in their publications. These factors placed evolutionary language in a position not only to justify ideas, but as a significant framework through which political arguments were negotiated [4].

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4. Scientific authority and the naturalization of inequality

4.1. The cultural authority of science

By the late nineteenth century, science had acquired growing cultural authority as a means of understanding both the natural world and human society. The expansion of scientific publishing, education, and public engagement encouraged the regard of scientific knowledge as a privileged source of truth rather than merely intellectual inquiry. James Samuelson and William Crookes wrote in their book *Quarterly Journal of Science* in 1864 that "*not alone scientific readers, but those of every class, desire to approach the source from whence this species of knowledge [science] is derived ...*" [9] Their comment suggests that science was no longer confined to specialist circles, but had become part of a broader public culture of knowledge.

This authority rested partly on the association of science with rationality, evidence, and objectivity. Scientific knowledge was increasingly perceived as capable of revealing truths that were more reliable than political opinion or moral sentiment. Francis Newman, in *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation,*claimed that "*the public at large have the unanimity of men of science as the great guarantee of truth.*" [9] Such statements indicate that scientific consensus was becoming a marker of credibility. Scientific authorities could therefore function as cultural resources where ideas presented as scientific seem to carry a claim to truth.

Within this broader culture of confidence in science, evolutionary theory acquired particular significance. Darwin's theory of evolution became one of the most influential scientific frameworks of the nineteenth century. Contemporary scientists quickly recognized the strength of Darwin's arguments for common ancestry and homology [10]. Later historians such as Peter J. Bowler have similarly emphasized that evolutionary theories, especially common descent, gained widespread acceptance, even though the mechanism of natural selection remained contested in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [11]. This demonstrates that the broader idea of development through natural processes had become intellectually powerful rather than Darwin's whole thought. It was this authority that allowed evolutionary language to be applied beyond biology and into debates about society, morality, and political economy.

Karl Pearson's responses to Darwinism further illustrate the wider moral and social implications of evolutionary thought. He described Darwin's evolutionary thoughts not merely as a scientific discovery, but as an intellectual transformation that reshaped understanding of "both individual and social life," and "remodel[ed] our historical ideas and is slowly widening and consolidating our moral standards." Pearson's comments marked that evolutionary thought was widely accepted as possessing scientific authority and beyond, shaping people's understanding, society, and moral values [8].

4.2. From scientific authority to moral authority

The authority of science did not remain confined to the natural sciences. Nineteenth-century intellectuals increasingly applied scientific methods and concepts to social and political fields. Richard Olson describes this broader tendency as "scientism," meaning "*the transfer of ideas, practices, attitudes, and methodologies from the context of the study of the natural world.....into the study of humans and their social institutions, without imposing any judgment on the legitimacy of such an appropriation.*" [12] Social Darwinism was one important example of this process. It drew upon the prestige of evolutionary science to present claims about social organization, competition, and morality as if they were grounded in natural law.

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The central move in Social Darwinist reasoning was the appeal to nature. Concepts such as "fitness," "adaptation," "survival," and "natural law" seemed to offer a scientific explanation for change, development and progress [11]. Herbert Spencer was especially important in translating evolutionary ideas into a social and political framework. In *Principles of Biology*, Spencer associated his phrase, "survival of the fittest" with Darwin's "natural selection" after the publication of On the Origin of Species: "*This 'survival of the fittest,' which I have here sought to express in mechanical terms, is that which Mr. Darwin has called 'natural selection' or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*." [13]. By drawing this connection, Spencer made social competition appear analogous to biological evolution. In his later seminal work, *Principles of Sociology*, Spencer developed this logic further, claiming that "*rules of behavior.....are natural products of social life which have gradually evolved. Apart from detailed proofs of this, we find a general proof in their conformity to the laws of Evolution at large.*" [14] He also suggested that moral rules could be deduced from the "laws of life," linking natural process to happiness and social improvement [15]. In this formulation, morality was grounded not in independent ethical principles, but in nature itself. The result was a form of reasoning close to what critics describe as the naturalistic fallacy: the assumption that what exists in nature can determine how human beings ought to behave [16]. This transformation had important consequences for debates about inequality. If competition and hierarchy were understood as natural processes, they could be presented not as products of human institutions or political decisions, but as inevitable outcomes of evolutionary development. Scientific language therefore helped convert social inequality from a moral problem into an apparent fact of nature. This reduced the force of arguments that treated poverty as a result of exploitation, unequal opportunity, or political failure.

Once competition was understood as both natural and morally beneficial, social outcomes became reflections of individual fitness. Wealth and status appeared to signify adaptability, intelligence, and industriousness, thereby redefining the poor to be an unfit or undeserving population, while the rich gained their wealth through merit. Rowlingson and Connor identify merits like hard work and contribution as important criteria through which societies judge desert, and such as a "potential reason to deviate from equality." [17] Social Darwinist reasoning gave this moral logic a scientific vocabulary. Sumner commented on "*If Mr. A.T. Stewart made a great fortune by collecting and bringing dry-goods to the people of the United States, he did so because he understood how to do that thing better than any other man of his generation*." [18] Economic success was thus presented as evidence of superior competence and adaptation.

The same logic could be applied negatively to poverty. If wealth signified fitness, poverty could be interpreted as evidence of individual deficiency rather than structural disadvantage. Capitalists and Social Darwinist thinkers could therefore frame poverty as the result of weakness, lack of ability, or failure to compete successfully. This frames poverty as an outcome of the population's own lack of abilities to gain wealth, rather than structural inequalities, unequal opportunity, or exploitation. This shows how the Gilded Age inequality was labeled with natural and biological roots that led to the stratification of individuals' abilities, justifying claims like poor people should be poor. In this way, Social Darwinists transformed inequality into a judgment about individual worth. Wealth appeared deserved because it signaled merit and capability, while poverty proved personal inadequacy. The moral force of Social Darwinism therefore lay in its ability to make inequality appear not merely economically unavoidable, but naturally and morally justified.

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4.3. Competition, fitness, and moral desert

Social Darwinist arguments did not merely present competition as natural; they also represented it as progressive. If society was understood through an evolutionary framework, competition could be interpreted as the mechanism through which social improvement occurred. In this view, inequality was not simply an unfortunate by-product of capitalism, but a necessary condition of advancement. Individual hardship could therefore be justified by reference to the progress of society as a whole. Andrew Carnegie's defense of industrial competition illustrates this logic. In "Wealth," Carnegie argued that "while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department." [19] This statement framed competition as socially beneficial even when it produced individual suffering. Inequality was therefore given a moral justification as part of a larger process of collective improvement. Rather than appearing as a failure of social organization, capitalist inequality could be represented as the cost of progress.

Naomi Beck makes a similar point in her analysis of Spencer, arguing that he was central to presenting competition as a force for advancement. In Spencer's thought, "economic competition replaced violent struggle for existence as the motor of further progress." [20] Competition therefore acquired an explicitly evolutionary purpose: rather than being merely natural, it was understood as a process through which society advanced toward higher stages of development. Wealth, in this framework, signified more than individual success. It appeared as evidence that competition had rewarded those best able to adapt and succeed, thereby revealing individuals who seemed more capable, efficient, and fit. This connection between competition and progress had important moral consequences. Once inequality was interpreted as a necessary stage in social development rather than as a product of social institutions, political responsibility for correcting it appeared unnecessary or even harmful. Social Darwinist reasoning thus transformed inequality from a problem to be remedied into a process to be endured, defended, or even encouraged. The language of progress made social suffering appear meaningful, because individual hardship could be presented as contributing to the long-term improvement of society as a whole.

4.4. Responsibility, reform, and state intervention

The moralization of competition also shaped arguments about state intervention. If competition was the mechanism of social progress, then welfare, reform, and poor relief could be criticized as artificial interference with evolutionary development. In this view, intervention did not merely disrupt the market; it obstructed the natural processes through which society improved. Naomi Beck noted that Spencer strongly opposed social reforms as he viewed them as either against natural progress or ineffective to accelerate progress [20]. For example, he explicitly claimed that: "*if they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die*." [21] This claim treated the elimination of the weak not as a moral tragedy requiring collective response, but as part of the natural order. The implication was that protecting those who failed in competition would preserve the unfit and delay social progress.

In this way, Social Darwinist reasoning made government intervention appear not only economically inefficient, but morally irresponsible. Welfare and reform could be represented as sentimental attempts to suspend natural law. By framing inequality as the outcome of evolutionary competition, Social Darwinist arguments shifted responsibility away from social institutions and toward individuals. Poverty became evidence of failure to adapt, while intervention became interference with the progress of civilization.

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5. Discussion and reflection

The preceding analysis suggests that the influence of Social Darwinism in Gilded Age America cannot be understood solely as a defense of laissez-faire capitalism or as a simple justification of inequality. Hofstadter's classical interpretation remains important because it identified the relationship between evolutionary language, competitive individualism, and the legitimation of industrial capitalism. Yet revisionist scholars such as Diane Paul, Thomas Leonard, Naomi Beck, and Lorenzo Costaguta have shown that evolutionary concepts could be adapted to a much wider range of social and political arguments. Darwinian and Spencerian language could support laissez-faire economics, reformist intervention, socialist argument, racial hierarchy, gender conservatism, and even critiques of competition itself. This flexibility does not make Social Darwinism historically insignificant. Rather, it suggests that its importance lay in the wider authority acquired by evolutionary language in the late nineteenth century.

This paper has therefore shifted attention from what Social Darwinism justified to how evolutionary language became persuasive. Its central argument is that scientific discourse gave moral and political claims the appearance of objectivity. In a period when science was increasingly associated with truth, rationality, progress, and natural law, evolutionary vocabulary could move beyond biology and enter debates over society. Terms such as "fitness," "adaptation," "selection," and "survival" allowed social outcomes to be described as if they followed natural processes rather than political decisions. Competition could be represented as beneficial, inequality as natural, wealth as evidence of adaptation, poverty as failure, and state intervention as interference with social development. The power of Social Darwinist reasoning therefore lay not only in the conclusions it reached, but in the way it converted moral judgments into claims about nature.

A fuller account of Social Darwinism's influence would require closer attention to audience reception. This paper has focused primarily on the production and circulation of evolutionary language among intellectuals, reformers, political economists, business figures, and public commentators. It can therefore explain why Social Darwinist reasoning was rhetorically powerful, but it cannot fully measure how ordinary Americans accepted, resisted, or reinterpreted such arguments. The question of reception is nevertheless important, because evolutionary language may have appealed to wider audiences living through industrialization, labor conflict, urban poverty, and rapid social mobility. In this context, terms such as "fitness," "competition," and "progress" offered a way to make social disruption appear meaningful and ordered. They could help explain why some individuals succeeded while others failed, and why inequality might be understood as part of a larger process of social development rather than merely as injustice. Future research could examine newspapers, sermons, school materials, advertisements, popular magazines, and reform literature to assess how far these ideas entered everyday understandings of poverty, mobility, and responsibility.

A further limitation is that Social Darwinism did not operate in isolation. It existed within a broader nineteenth-century intellectual landscape that also included Protestant moral thought, racial science, nationalism, classical political economy, liberal individualism, and ideas of progress. These traditions often overlapped with evolutionary language, making it difficult to isolate Social Darwinism as a single cause of attitudes toward inequality. This overlap, however, is also historically significant. It suggests that evolutionary discourse became powerful partly because it could attach itself to older moral, religious, racial, and economic assumptions, giving them a renewed claim to scientific legitimacy.

The historical significance of Social Darwinism lies not only in the particular ideologies it supported, but in what it reveals about the relationship between science and society. Evolutionary

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language demonstrates how scientific concepts can move beyond their original field and acquire moral authority in debates over human behavior, social hierarchy, and political responsibility. When social arrangements are described through the language of nature, objectivity, and progress, they can appear less like products of human choice and more like inevitable outcomes of natural development. Social Darwinism therefore offers a powerful example of how scientific discourse can naturalize inequality and transform contested political arguments into apparently objective truths.

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