

## Darwin's Influence on Economics during the Victorian Era and Today

Charles Darwin pioneered how society views the natural world today, but the effects of his ideas on people and movements throughout history are not as clearly understood. Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection developed over the course of his travels and studies, documented in *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *On the Origin of Species*, but the philosophies that emerged from this are better analyzed through the surrounding events of the Victorian era. Specifically, this paper first examines Darwin's influence through the lens of Victorian literature and philosophy, followed by the comparison of two trains of thought: Social Darwinism and Historical Materialism. Social Darwinism, as shown in this paper, arose from misinformed opinions regarding political and economic climates of the Victorian era, whereas Historical Imperialism casts a more reasonable prediction of how Darwin's ideas could be applied to the functioning of society.

Darwin's first book, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, documents his five-year-long journeys throughout the Southern Hemisphere, exploring portions of Africa, South America, and Oceania. Published in 1831, the book's most important contributions to the scientific community occurred during his time at the Galapagos Islands, where Darwin examined a species of birds whose beaks' sizes varied between islands. In Chapter 17, Darwin's observations pertaining to a specific kind of finch, which he identifies as "genus Geospiza," are described: "The largest beak in the genus Geospiza is shown ... but instead of there being only one intermediate species, ... there are no less than six species with insensibly graduated beak,." (*The Voyage of the Beagle* 378), These observations led to an inference which forever transformed the way scientists, particularly biologists, view the development of species: "Seeing this gradation and diversity of

structure in one small, intimately related group of birds, one might really fancy that ... one species had been taken and modified for different ends,” (*The Voyage of the Beagle* 379-380).

Essentially, Darwin remarks that a single species of finch developed varying characteristics based on its surroundings, an idea essential to the fully-constructed Theory of Natural Selection.

As the concept of evolution sunk in throughout the academic community, Herbert Spencer, an influential sociologist of the Victorian era, began to publish work that influenced the way Darwin’s ideas applied to society and its institutions. In 1851, Spencer’s book *Social Statics* was published, discussing a wide-ranging body of social ideologies, including but not limited to morality, personal rights, and political and economic rights. Spencer commences Section 1 of Chapter 3 with, “All evil results from the non-adaptation of constitution to conditions. This is true of everything that lives. Does a shrub dwindle in poor soil, or become sickly when deprived of light, or die outright if removed to a cold climate?” (*Social Statics*, 59) Here, Spencer applies reasoning about adaptation that Darwin studied in nature to politics, arguing that adaptation to environmental conditions is necessary for the survival of humans in modern society similar to that of animals in the natural world.

A key distinction between Spencer and others influenced by Darwinian ideas was Spencer’s emphasis on individualism. In defining morality in Part 1, Chapter 1, Spencer claims, “[W]hether it is possible to develop scientifically a Moral Pathology and a Moral Therapeutics seems very doubtful,” (*Social Statics*, 58). Subsequently, in Section 1 of Chapter 3, he states, “Greatest Happiness and Morality are the face and obverse of the same fact; what is written on the one surface is beyond our interpretation: what is written on the other we may read easily enough,” (*Social Statics*, 66). Here, Spencer advocates that a strict moral code based on divinity or some other basis is seemingly unattainable, and instead, individuals should strive for personal

happiness and maximize overall happiness. Finally, after reasoning about it in previous chapters, Spencer derives his “first principle” in Chapters 4 and 5, claiming in Chapter 6, “Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man,” (*Social Statics*, 103). Spencer’s focus on individual happiness is a major precursor to his later emphasis on individual benefit from capital markets and the rise of Social Darwinism as a method of economic reasoning.

In Section 1 of Chapter 23 of *Social Statics*, Spencer expands his thoughts regarding adaptation and individualism to the realm of commerce, writing, “Hence, in putting a veto upon the commercial intercourse of two nations, or in putting obstacles in the way of that intercourse, a government trenches upon men’s liberties of action; and by doing so directly reverses its function,” (*Social Statics*, 297). It is conspicuous that Spencer believes all economics, including personal exchange and commercial exchange, should be unregulated, as it is the right of every man to find his own happiness given the present socioeconomic conditions - in fact, this is a moral imperative.

In 1859, Charles Darwin released a more thorough explanation of his findings in *On the Origin of Species*, describing guidelines that nature and its inhabitants follow based on observed phenomena. For the purposes of illustrating Darwin’s influence on economics, the three chapters titled “Variation Under Nature,” “Struggle for Existence,” and “Natural Selection.” In Chapter 2, “Variation Under Nature,” Darwin claims, “[V]arieties have the same general characters as species, for they cannot be distinguished from species, except, firstly, by the discovery of intermediate linking forms, and the occurrence of such links cannot affect the actual characters of the forms which they connect,” explaining how variation occurs in all natural systems, often to

the point where two systems seem unrelated but can be connected through a series of intermediate systems (*On the Origin of Species*, 32).

In Chapter 3, “Struggle for Existence,” Darwin formulates, “All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometrical ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction,” (*On the Origin of Species*, 41). This displays how Darwinian thought follows the logic that every community is limited by its resources and then every being in a natural system is in a constant struggle to remain in that natural system. This also implies that there will always be some beings that succeed at the expense of others in a natural system, but it does not cover cooperation nor any specific policy that guarantees success in natural systems.

Chapter 4, “Natural Selection,” identifies the crux of Darwinian thinking and the key idea that is taught in science classes to this day: “This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection,” (*On the Origin of Species*, 41). However, Darwin goes on to cover more specific principles, such as sexual selection and local diversity, which are often left unsaid when depicting Darwin’s ideas. One important idea in Chapter 4 that will be returned to later is the following: “In social animals [natural selection] will adapt the structure of each individual for the benefit of the community; if each in consequence profits by the selected change,” (*On the Origin of Species*, 44). Here, Darwin explains how communities cooperate in order to extend the longevity of the society rather than that of the individual, a significant development in natural systems that has allowed numerous modern living beings to outlive those that are extinct.

Only about a year after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Herbert Spencer released his essay *Social Organism*, comparing social systems to natural systems described by Darwin. Later, in his 1863 book titled *The Principles of Biology*, Spencer also coined "survival of the fittest," an expression often attributed to Darwin's ideas. *Social Organism* was a driving factor behind the proliferation of Social Darwinism, as by drawing similarities between social and natural systems, Spencer effectively created a philosophical support for unfettered capitalism present during the Victorian and ensuing eras. In *Herbert Spencer and the "Social Organism"*, Walter Simon delves into and criticizes Spencer's reasoning, arguing that "Spencer became aware that his political doctrines were not deducible from his philosophical premises; therefore he adjusted the premises sufficiently to allow the conclusions to follow," (Simon 299). This begs the question: what was Spencer's deduction regarding natural and social systems, and why is it an unreasonable conclusion based on the principles of Natural Selection?

Spencer's argument in *Social Organism* revolves around how social systems have naturally evolved, improving over time, and that this process should not be interfered with as it is a natural hierarchy. This is evident throughout *Social Organism* but can be easily seen when Spencer said, "So long as society is let alone, its various organs will go on developing in due subordination to each other.... To interfere with this process by producing premature development in any particular direction is inevitably to disturb the true balance of organization by causing somewhere else a corresponding atrophy," (Simon 297). Simon shows that there is an important distinction that Spencer fails to make in that individuals can act selflessly for the benefit of the society, a concept referred to as biological altruism, but the aggregate does not have a mind of its own and cannot act to benefit the individual.

Spencer's failure to comprehend how the benefits of society play a role in whether the aggregate is naturally selected outweigh individual efforts to survive, a train of thought that Darwin describes in Chapter 4 of *On the Origin of Species* and that Herbert Spencer ignores. Another ideology during this time period, Historical Materialism, better reflects Darwin's ideas.

Arguably as big an influence as Darwin during the Victorian era, Karl Marx laid the groundwork for communism as a form of socialism in *The Communist Manifesto*, inspired by class struggles in Europe during this time. Friedrich Engels, another prominent socialist of the time, co-authored *The Communist Manifesto*, as well as releasing another famous work called *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In 1848, Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, describing how two groups - the working class, or proletariat, and property-owning class, or bourgeoisie - struggled against each other, and how this class struggle has been found in every society historically. Marx and Engels' ideology here could be seen as reinforcement to Spencer's *Social Organism*; if the exploited class revolts against the ruling class every time the means of production change, society could be seen as an evolving organism, constantly shifting to improve itself as technology progresses.

To fully understand why Spencer's argument is contradicted by Marxist philosophy, Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* should be explored, followed by a deeper dive into the ideas that *The Communist Manifesto* proposed. In the chapter titled "Great Towns" of *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Engels discusses his firsthand encounters of the terrible conditions of England's working class. For example, in portraying the St. Giles slum of London, Engels says, "It is a disorderly collection of tall, three- or four-storied houses, with narrow, crooked, filthy streets, in which there is quite as much life as in the great thoroughfares of the town, except that, here, people of the working-class only are to be seen,"

indicating that the working class were being exploited in England (Engels 46). A later chapter titled “The Attitude of the Bourgeoisie toward the Proletariat” attacks the wealthy business and property owners of England and rebuts defenses made for this class. To explain charitable donations that the Bourgeoisie make, Engels claims, “The English bourgeoisie is charitable out of self-interest; it gives nothing outright, but regards its gifts as a business matter,” (Engels 184).

As previously noted, *The Communist Manifesto* extends this idea, noting that class struggles have always been an element of society, occurring between those who owned the means of production and the laborers, dating back to feudalism in agrarian societies: “In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations,” (Marx). This is similar to Darwin’s idea of Variation Under Nature, where each society has developed a new and gradually worse form of class struggles, similar to how two seemingly different species are linked by intermediate steps.

One factor that distinguishes Marx and Engels from Spencer is that they emphasize how capitalism is the final class struggle, possessing conditions of extreme inequality that will result in a Communist revolution that will abolish these classes. This is a crucial point behind Historical Materialism, as Baur defines in explaining the concept Historical Materialism in *Marx on Historical Materialism*: “By understanding how the productive activities of human beings give rise to the division of labor and class conflict, it becomes possible, according to Marx, to understand how different historical epochs succeed one another, and how the trajectory of human history points towards a communist society within which the division of labor and class conflict

Ishan Chadha

will be abolished,” (Acton and Baur 1). Essentially, the claim here is that once the workers own the means of production and material desires are relinquished, society has achieved an enlightenment from class struggles.

Darwin’s interactions with Engels and Marx were very limited, but Marx and Engels repeatedly endorsed Darwin’s scientific theories (Angus). Historical Materialism can be interpreted as a sociological term for the scientific idea of biological altruism found in nature like colonies of ants: individual desires are capitulated in favor of the overall benefit of society. The concept of progressing society, or an entire species, as opposed to focusing on individual happiness is described in Darwin’s chapter on Natural Selection, yet completely ignored by Herbert Spencer and the resulting Social Darwinism.

The misinterpretation of Darwin’s ideas applied to society is still seen today, as well as the problems that Marx and Engels highlighted throughout their careers. Unregulated capitalism has been shown to exacerbate socioeconomic discrepancies based on the influence of the wealthy, where these wealthy individuals maximize their own happiness as Spencer foresaw, but society as a whole does not progress. Contrary to this, the idea that the Bourgeoisie pretend to be charitable while actually utilizing donations for their own benefits is seen commonly with corporate lobbying in elections and public policy, especially by billionaires. However, with wealth more evenly distributed under a Marxist society, more opportunities would exist for workers to receive education and start businesses, allowing for society to actually meet the needs of the people and progressing society rather than making the Bourgeoisie wealthier at the expense of workers. Thus, although Social Darwinism has governed the way in which economics has developed since the onset of Darwinian thought, this is a misinterpretation of how Darwin



Ishan Chadha

actually described societies found in nature - his true ideas were closer to Marx and Engels' philosophy of Historical Materialism.

References

Acton, H B, and Michael Baur. "(PDF) Marx on Historical Materialism." *ResearchGate*, Unknown, 1 Jan. 2017, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334446734\\_Marx\\_on\\_Historical\\_Materialism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334446734_Marx_on_Historical_Materialism).

Angus, Ian. "Marx, Engels and Darwin." *Reading from the Left*, <http://readingfromtheleft.com/PDF/Marx-Engels-Darwin.pdf>.

Darwin, Charles. *The Origin of Species*. Antiquarius, 2021.

Darwin, Charles. *Voyage of the Beagle*. Antiquarius, 2021.

Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Basil Blackwell, 1971.

Marx, Karl. *Communist Manifesto*. DIGIREADS COM, 2021.

Simon, Walter M. *Herbert Spencer and the 'Social Organism'*.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2708202>.

Spencer, Herbert. *Essay the Social Organism (1860)*.

[http://www.suz.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:00000000-36d7-41d4-ffff-ffffc03113dd/Essay\\_Spencer\\_TheSocialOrganism.pdf](http://www.suz.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:00000000-36d7-41d4-ffff-ffffc03113dd/Essay_Spencer_TheSocialOrganism.pdf).

Spencer, Herbert. *Social Statics*. Routledge U.a., 1996.