

# H-Net Reviews

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**Mike Hawkins.** *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x + 344 pp. \$47.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-57434-1; \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-57400-6.

Reviewed by Richard Weikart (California State University at Stanislaus)  
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Hawkins provides a keen analysis of Social Darwinism in an important and thought-provoking work that will surely become the standard work on the subject for some time to come. It is a superb corrective to the fairly popular revisionist interpretation of Social Darwinism propagated by Robert Bannister and others. However, his interpretation is not simply a reiteration of the classic Hofstadter thesis.

Unlike Hofstadter, who boiled down Social Darwinism to *laissez-faire* economics, racism, militarism, and imperialism, much recent scholarship on Social Darwinism has emphasized the varieties of Social Darwinism, since thinkers often applied Darwinism to social and political thought in contradictory ways—socialists and pacifists appealed to Darwinism for support as much as *laissez faire* proponents and militarists. The beauty of Hawkins' analysis is that he takes account of the diversity of political and social views espoused by Darwinists, while bringing out the underlying commonalities. He does this by distinguishing between Social Darwinism as a fundamental world view and the political and social ideologies built on that world view. He defines Social Darwinism as a world view containing the following five beliefs: 1) biological laws govern all of nature, including humans, 2) Malthusian population pressure produces a struggle for existence, 3) physical and mental traits providing an advantage to individuals or species would spread, 4) selection and inheritance would produce new species and eliminate others, and 5) natural laws (including the four above) extend to human social existence, including morality and religion. Those embracing these fundamental points are Social Darwinists, whether they are militarists or pacifists, *laissez-faire* proponents or socialists.

Hawkins admits in his introduction that his work is not a comprehensive history of Social Darwinism. Instead he provides in-depth analysis of key Social Darwinists, such as John Fisk and William Graham Sumner in the United States, Herbert Spencer and Benjamin Kidd in England, Clemence Royer in France, Ernst Haeckel in Germany, and Cesare Lombroso in Italy. He also covers the relationship of socialists, racists, and militarists to Social Darwinism. His chapter on eugenics is conceptually rich and suggestive, but not so strong historically, since he doesn't even mention many of the most important figures in the eugenics movement. The few eugenicists he analyzes, though, do provide a good representation of the movement as a whole. In his final chapter comparing the Nazis' and Italian Fascists' relationship to Social Darwinism, Hawkins argues that the Nazis were thoroughly committed to Social Darwinism, while the Fascists, with a few exceptions, were not.

I expect that Hawkins' interpretation of Spencer as a Darwinist rather than a Lamarckian will stir some controversy, for most scholars consider Spencer a committed Lamarckian. Hawkins produces sufficient evidence to show that Spencer did embrace natural selection after 1859, though he continued to emphasize the inheritance of acquired characteristics to a greater extent than did Darwin. In his chapter on Spencer and elsewhere Hawkins is clear-sighted enough to recognize that in the late nineteenth century Darwinian selection was not antithetical to Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics (as some scholars anachronistically assume). Many Darwinists—including Darwin—synthesized natural selection and the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Unfortunately, Hawkins did not discuss Spencer's pre-Darwinian views, so the question remains: Was

Spencer a Darwinian of sorts before Darwin published his theory, or was there a shift in his thought after Darwin's theory appeared? We need further explication of this.

Because he covers an immense amount of territory in his book, specialists in some of the areas he covers (eugenics, Nazism, Fascism, Spencer, etc.) may quibble with his selectivity and some may want greater depth in their area of expertise. But hopefully this will not distract from the overall merits of the book. One reason I find this book so exciting is that Hawkins has provided a useful defini-

tion and analysis of Social Darwinism on which future scholarship can build. Even if one disagrees with some of the examples he provides (I question a few of them), or thinks he ignores some important thinkers, his work is still useful and can serve as a springboard for further study. It will also serve as a useful text in a variety of courses in the history of science and intellectual history.

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