

## Laissez-Faire Social Darwinism and Individualist Competition in Darwin and Huxley

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Before publishing *The Descent of Man* in 1871 and even to a great extent thereafter, Darwin was fairly reticent to articulate publicly his social, political, moral, and religious views, and he deftly sidestepped human evolution in *The Origin of Species* (1859) to avoid these controversial topics. However, in *Origin* he confessed without hesitation or shame that his theory of natural selection was an application of Malthus's population principle to the natural realm. Most scholars today admit that Malthus played a critical role in the formulation of the theory of natural selection.<sup>1</sup> Darwin culled other biological ideas from political economy as well.<sup>2</sup>

In trying to convince us, however, that "Darwinism *Is* Social," Robert Young, John C. Greene, James Moore, Silvan S. Schweber, and Adrian Desmond have encountered widespread opposition from those exonerating Darwin from responsibility for the social applications of his theory.<sup>3</sup> One of the most ambitious attempts to divorce Darwin from Social Darwinism has been that of Robert Bannister, who has won numerous adherents to his view that Social Darwinism—at least if it is construed in its classical Hofstadterian sense of a social theory embracing laissez-faire economic competition, as well as national and racial competition—was almost nonexistent in late nineteenth-century Britain and the United States. Bannister, like many other scholars, swept aside all contentions that Darwin himself contributed anything to the rise of competitive models of society: "Since Darwin meant pigeons not people in referring to struggle, all applications to human society were nonsense."<sup>4</sup> He threw all the onus for laissez-faire Social Darwinism on Herbert Spencer (claiming that it is not even really Social Darwinism so much as social Lamarckism)<sup>5</sup> and claimed that Social Darwinism was almost nonexistent in the nineteenth century. Instead, it was a straw man created by progressives opposed to laissez-faire individualism, according to Bannister.<sup>6</sup>

By focusing on one facet of Social Darwinism—individualist, laissez-faire economic competition—I intend to demonstrate (in part by introducing new evidence into the debate) that Darwin and Huxley both applied their biological views to social questions and did so in a way consistent with Hofstadter's claim that Darwinism lent support to laissez-faire economics.<sup>7</sup> Because of their emphasis on a naturalistic explanation for human evolution, they both stressed the affinity of humans with the rest of the organic world and placed humans squarely under the sway of natural laws, including the struggle for existence as an ineluctable intraspecies struggle. Both embraced the Malthusian population for-



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mula as valid for human society and considered the natural tendency to overpopulation the inescapable source of poverty and misery. Furthermore, they extended their stress on variation within biological species to humanity, leading them to argue that socioeconomic inequality is necessary and is largely based on biological inequality. Darwin, and even more so Huxley, made clear that they were advocates of capitalism and opponents of socialism; they used the theory of natural selection to support their competitive view of the economy.

The problem with most discussions of Social Darwinism heretofore is that they often revolve around a misleading dichotomy between individualism and collectivism. Richard Hofstadter relegated the individualist aspects of Social Darwinism (*laissez-faire*) to an early phase, while collectivist forms—nationalism, militarism, and racism—emerged later.<sup>8</sup> What many have forgotten is that individualist economic competition and collective competition (economic or military) are not mutually exclusive, but coexist in the real world.<sup>9</sup> No one is forced to choose between the two, for relationships certainly exist between them. Indeed, Darwin emphasized both individual and collective competition among people in his writings.

Before presenting Darwin's social and economic views, we must first enter perilous waters by defining *laissez faire*, something that most writers on Social Darwinism neglect to do. Although there is no unanimity among economic historians concerning the extent of the domination of *laissez-faire* ideas in nineteenth-century Britain, one thing seems fairly well established: proponents of *laissez-faire* were not as doctrinaire and absolute in their opposition to government intervention as the popular caricature of their position would suggest. Such disparate writers as Malthus, John Stuart Mill, and Samuel Smiles, who are often considered the epitome of economic liberalism and individualistic competition in nineteenth-century Britain, argued that state interference in the economy was entirely permissible in some cases, and they favored some kinds of social reform. J. S. Mill, for example, though arguing in his *Principles of Political Economy* that "*Laissez-faire* . . . should be the general practice; every departure from it, unless required by some great good, is a certain evil," allowed for a great deal of government intervention, including government-sponsored education, regulation of child labor, and building roads, docks, hospitals, etc. He allowed for this intervention, because he drew a distinction between authoritative and nonauthoritative government intervention, the former being restrictions on individual's actions, while the latter is the government establishing its own institutions without prohibiting others from establishing similar ones. In Mill's view the authoritative intervention should be restrained to the minimum possible, while the nonauthoritative was more permissible. For him and other classical economists, then, *laissez-faire* was a general rule of thumb, not an absolute principle.<sup>10</sup>

By mistakenly depicting Herbert Spencer as the quintessential *laissez-faire* proponent, Bannister and other writers on Social Darwinism have ironically fallen prey to the same snare that they claim to expose. While rejecting the straw man of Social Darwinism allegedly created by progressives in the late nineteenth century, they embrace the caricature of *laissez-faire* created by the same reformers. They continually refer to *laissez-faire* as brutal competition, rampant capitalism, and unrestrained individualism. Once they succeed in demonstrating that some thinker—such as Darwin—had even a tinge of moral compunction or favored any kind of social reforms whatsoever, they think they have removed his name forever from the list of *laissez-faire* Social Darwinists.

Of course, laissez-faire was a prominent economic position in early-nineteenth-century Britain, and the doctrines of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and J. S. Mill encouraged its spread with their emphasis on the natural harmony of interests and decreased government intervention in the economy. Two distinct forms of laissez-faire economics emerged: free trade and government nonintervention in the domestic economy. Many advocates of the former, such as the Manchester School, were not necessarily proponents of the latter. I will use the term laissez-faire to refer to nonintervention in both international trade and domestic economic policy. However, since most economists and laissez-faire advocates were flexible and tolerated limited forms of government intervention, it will not be used to mean an *absolute* hands-off policy. Furthermore, many advocates of laissez-faire economics were not as adamant about laissez-faire when it came to questions of social policy, such as sanitation or education. Although Spencer embraced even this more radically individualistic third form of laissez-faire, not all laissez-faire advocates applied their economic theories to social policies. Laissez-faire was no amoral free-for-all with complete indifference to all human suffering, though its opponents depicted it as such. (I am not defending laissez-faire here, nor do I deny that laissez-faire was sometimes used ideologically by immoral people to justify oppressing their fellow human beings.)

Darwin's early exposure to classical political economy and his personal predilection for free trade and economic competition in the pre-*Origin* period are well known. He grew up in a Whig environment, and *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) reflected this influence. He looked down on the natives of Tierra del Fuego for their economic equality, which hindered the development of civilization. A positive step for the Fuegians, in his view, would be the emergence of a leader, which could only happen through the introduction of private property and the accumulation of wealth.<sup>11</sup> After returning to England, he not only read Malthus and Adam Smith, but he also had considerable personal contact with a more radical laissez-faire publicist, Harriet Martineau, an intimate friend of his brother. In the debate over the Corn Laws, Darwin favored repeal and free trade, despite the personal loss it brought him as an absentee landowner. Throughout their lives, Darwin and his wife lived off the receipts of invested capital inherited from their wealthy parents.<sup>12</sup>

Because Darwin skirted the issue of human evolution and social development in *Origin*, it would be unfair to characterize him as a Social Darwinist on the basis of this book. Nonetheless, certain elements of *Origin* did provide succor to laissez-faire Social Darwinists. First of all, Darwin forthrightly acknowledged Malthus's influence in shaping his theory, and although he did not (yet) explicitly endorse the Malthusian formula's application to human populations, many rightly inferred that he upheld this view.<sup>13</sup> Further, he stressed that competition is most intense between individuals of the same species, because they are competing for the same niche:

But the struggle almost invariably will be most severe between the individuals of the same species, for they frequent the same districts, require the same food, and are exposed to the same dangers.<sup>14</sup>

This could easily be extrapolated to the human species and justify economic competition, especially since Darwin depicted the struggle for existence as meliorative. Finally, Darwin exulted in the struggle for existence—even when violent—as a beneficent force:

It may be difficult, but we ought to admire the savage instinctive hatred of the queen-bee,

which urges her instantly to destroy the young queens her daughters as soon as born, or to perish herself in the combat; for undoubtedly this is for the good of the community; and maternal love or maternal hatred, though the latter fortunately is most rare, is all the same to the inexorable principle of natural selection.<sup>15</sup>

One might infer—and some of Darwin's contemporaries certainly did—that the savage or distasteful features of capitalism could be equally admired, though, of course, Darwin by no means takes this position in *Origin*.

Some commentators on Darwinism and Social Darwinism dispute the view of Darwin I have just presented by ignoring the individualist competition inherent in Darwin's views and by emphasizing the metaphorical nature of Darwin's use of the phrase, "struggle for existence." Edward Manier, for example, argues that Darwin had three ambiguous and overlapping meanings for the struggle for existence: the interdependence of organisms; chance (as in seed dispersal); and competition.<sup>16</sup> I do not dispute that Darwin himself stressed the "large and metaphorical sense" in which he used the phrase, and individualist competition was not the only form the struggle for existence could take, but Manier ignores the primary thrust of Darwin's argument and focuses on aspects that Darwin himself deemphasized. Of the five examples Darwin provided for the struggle for existence in his paragraph discussing the metaphorical use of the phrase, it is interesting that most involve intraspecies competition (though none involved direct combat): two describe an intraspecies individualist struggle for scarce resources (canines and mistletoe), two involve both intraspecies and interspecies competition to reproduce (a plant producing seeds; mistletoe competing to get birds to disseminate seeds), and one is the struggle against the environment (a plant on the edge of a desert). Though Darwin claimed that the struggle for existence included "dependence of one being on another," when he gave a concrete example of this in the same paragraph (mistletoe depending on a tree), he asserted that it "can only in a far-fetched sense be said to struggle with these trees." Rather, he continued, the mistletoes "may more truly be said to struggle with each other."<sup>17</sup> The stress in this paragraph is clearly on competition; interdependence is subsidiary at best.

In the following paragraph Darwin provided a succinct definition of the struggle for existence:

Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life.<sup>18</sup>

Darwin was using struggle with a threefold meaning, but the emphasis here (and everywhere else in Darwin's writings) is clearly not on the three given by Manier. The reason Darwin did not place much stress on interdependence and chance is that they would do nothing to produce natural selection, the key idea he was promoting. The only place interdependence might be selective is where organisms are competing for access to an interdependent relationship. Darwin's own examples make this clear.

Although Karl Marx and other contemporaries noted the similarities between the *Origin* and the British capitalist economy, it would nevertheless be unfair to characterize it as a Social Darwinist work, for Darwin purposely avoided applying his theory to humans because of tactical considerations.<sup>19</sup> Whether the principles of his *Origin* applied to hu-

mans and in what way was and is debatable, but Darwin in *Descent* left no doubt that, in his view, the principles expounded in *Origin* were fully applicable to humans. In the introduction to *Descent* he admitted that his concluding remark in *Origin* that his theory would shed light on the origin and history of humanity implied that humans arose in the same manner as other species. Darwin thus sanctioned attempts to apply natural selection and the struggle for existence to humanity, and he proceeded to do this himself in *Descent*.

When Darwin began consciously to apply his theory of natural selection through the struggle for existence to human society, he faced two main problems that were difficult to account for in terms of intraspecies individualist competition, which had dominated the discussion in *Origin*. First, he needed to account for human morality, which would not seem to provide its possessor with any selective advantage, but, to the contrary, could be detrimental in the struggle for existence. Second, he came to recognize that numerous human traits seem to be neither advantageous nor disadvantageous in the struggle for existence. Darwin insisted that morality arose through natural selection as a result of an intraspecies struggle for existence, but he shifted emphasis from individual to collective competition. Social instincts, the source of moral feelings, could be advantageous in the struggle for existence, since by selfless cooperation in herds and packs, or tribes and nations, animals and humans would receive protection and mutual assistance in procuring sustenance. The tribe or nation showing greatest selflessness would prevail over its counterparts lacking social instincts and moral feelings.<sup>20</sup> To account for neutral traits, however, Darwin developed in great detail the concept of sexual selection, whereby some traits are selected not for their utility, but for their beauty or appeal to the prospective mate.

Many authors have implied that Darwin's insistence on social solidarity and collective competition in *Descent* proves that he was no laissez-faire individualist or defender of capitalism. However, this not only ignores numerous passages where Darwin specifically illustrated the struggle for existence in terms of individualist economic competition, but it also ignores the primary thrust of *Descent*, which is to corroborate the principles presented in *Origin* and apply them to humans. Darwin's main contention throughout the book is that the distinction between humans and animals is one of degree, not of kind. He constantly emphasized that humans are subject to the same laws and principles operating in the animal realm.

In *Descent*, Darwin clearly applied the Malthusian population equation to human population.<sup>21</sup> Population pressure would thus necessitate human rivalry for scarce foodstuffs:

Natural selection follows from the struggle for existence; and this from a rapid rate of increase. It is impossible not bitterly to regret, but whether wisely is another question, the rate at which man tends to increase; for this leads in barbarous tribes to infanticide and many other evils, and in civilised nations to abject poverty, celibacy, and to the late marriages of the prudent. But as man suffers from the same physical evils with the lower animals, he has no right to expect an immunity from the evils consequent on the struggle for existence.<sup>22</sup>

Economic competition is thus endemic in Darwin's theory of social development because of overpopulation, and there is no way to overcome poverty. This passage also illustrates the tension between Darwin's moral sentiments, which evinced sympathy for the down-trodden, and his reason, which convinced him that even the harsher aspects of the struggle

for existence were ultimately salutary. He did not believe that humanity would have reached its present position "had not the rate of increase been rapid and the consequent struggle for existence severe to an extreme degree."<sup>23</sup>

In the closing pages of *Descent* Darwin explored the question of the "advancement of the welfare of mankind." He concluded that the poor may ameliorate their conditions by following Malthus's advice and foregoing marriage until they can afford to raise children. However, he continued,

Man, like every other animal, has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through a struggle for existence consequent on his rapid multiplication; and if he is to advance still higher he must remain subject to a severe struggle. Otherwise he would soon sink into indolence, and the more highly-gifted men would not be more successful in the battle of life than the less gifted. Hence our natural rate of increase, though leading to many and obvious evils, must not be greatly diminished by any means. There should be open competition for all men; and the most able should not be prevented by laws or customs from succeeding best and rearing the largest number of offspring.<sup>24</sup>

Darwin was thus carrying Malthus a step further. Malthus had argued that it is impossible to alleviate poverty and the ills of society because of the disparity between population growth and the means of subsistence. Darwin was claiming that it was not only impossible, but also detrimental to future evolutionary development. He also made it clear that he opposed laws restricting free competition among people for available resources. What is this but advocacy of *laissez-faire* economics?

In another passage Darwin made it even more explicit that the human struggle for existence involves economic competition between individuals. He admitted that the accumulation of wealth and inheritance laws do not allow an equal chance to all in the struggle, but they are nevertheless necessary to advance civilization. Of course, Darwin had his own situation clearly in mind, since without inherited wealth, his scientific work would have been impossible. Furthermore, he asserted that the moderate accumulation of wealth was not inimical to natural selection, because the children of the *nouveaux riches* would usually compete in trades or professions, "so that the able in body and mind succeed best." However, he opposed primogeniture, since it gave the firstborn an advantage irrespective of ability and did not subject him to economic competition.<sup>25</sup> Much earlier Darwin had expressed disapproval of primogeniture on evolutionary grounds, when he wrote to Wallace, "but oh, what a scheme is primogeniture for destroying Natural Selection!"<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Darwin made clear in *Descent* that competition among humans for economic positions is a part of the struggle for existence by asserting that if each grade of society were divided into two groups—those intellectually superior and the inferior—the former would succeed in all occupations and would leave more offspring.<sup>27</sup>

However, while justifying economic competition and inequality, Darwin did not believe that the economic struggle was characterized by untrammelled selfishness. In his view, benevolence toward the poor and sick was a natural response springing from the social instincts, and even if it proved debilitating in some ways to the human species, such benevolence should continue.<sup>28</sup> However, it should be noted that Darwin was not arguing in this instance for significant government intervention in the economy, nor did he believe that government intervention could banish poverty. Although he mentioned the poor laws

in this passage, implying that this form of government intervention might be a legitimate expression of social instincts, this did not place Darwin outside the pale of laissez-faire, for most laissez-faire proponents—including Harriet Martineau—were zealous partisans of the Poor Law of 1834, which remained in effect throughout the nineteenth century. Paternalistic forms of benevolence were even more in harmony with Darwin's political and social outlook and practice, and this kind of intervention appealed more to him.<sup>29</sup>

Darwin's response to other laissez-faire Social Darwinists both before and shortly after publishing *Descent* made it quite clear that he considered individual economic competition an important element of human evolution and did not favor restrictions on this competition. In February 1869, Darwin wrote to Hugo Thiel, a German economics instructor at the University of Bonn, thanking him for his article, "Ueber einige Formen der landwirthschaftlichen Genossenschaften" (1868, "On a Few Forms of Agricultural Cooperatives"). In his article, Thiel argued that since humans are subject to the same natural laws as other organisms, the struggle for existence within society cannot be abolished. To the contrary, social institutions should be so ordered that competition is maximized, giving the more able and talented the victory, but minimizing casualties to as great an extent as possible. Thiel feared that cooperatives favor the weak and would allow them to succeed, dragging society down, and thus he opposed them on Darwinian grounds. However, while wanting to optimize competition and advocating the abolition of state-imposed barriers to trade, Thiel, like most nineteenth-century laissez-faire economists, did not oppose all government intervention. He favored some kinds of factory legislation, including the elimination of child labor.<sup>30</sup>

Darwin wrote a polite response to Thiel after reading his article:

You will readily believe how much interested I am in observing that you apply to moral and social questions analogous views to those which I have used in regard to the modification of species. It did not occur to me formerly that my views could be extended to such widely different, and most important subjects.<sup>31</sup>

Since Darwin had been grappling with questions of human morality and social development from the beginning of his speculations on transmutation in his secret notebooks in the 1830s, how could he assert that he had not previously considered how his theory could be applied to such questions? It is unlikely he was being insincere, for why would he want to deny priority if indeed he had already extended his theory to social thought? A better explanation is that Darwin had up to this point concentrated exclusively on the scientific task of attempting to understand and describe social and moral development, not to offer prescriptions for society. Thiel was prescribing social policy based on Darwinian conceptions—something Darwin had not done.

A month after writing Thiel, Darwin explained the meaning of the struggle for existence to the biologist William Preyer, who had sent Darwin a copy of his pamphlet endorsing economic competition as an unavoidable consequence of the struggle for existence. In his letter to Preyer, Darwin equated the struggle for existence with competition and then offered an example from human experience. The struggle can involve two men hunting for the same food in a situation of scarcity, he explained, or it can be the struggle of an individual against the elements. Thus Darwin clearly considered economic competition a form of the struggle for existence, although it was not the only form the struggle

could take.<sup>32</sup> Darwin by this time was already engaged in writing *Descent*, so it is extremely significant that he relied exclusively on individual competition in explaining the struggle for existence to Preyer and did not even mention collective forms of competition.

Shortly after the publication of *Descent* Darwin wrote to John Morley, the author of a review of his new book, giving further explanations of his position on the human struggle for existence. He could not have made it clearer that he conceived of the struggle for existence as competition among members of the same society:

When I speak [in *Descent*] of the necessity of a struggle for existence in order that mankind should advance still higher in the scale, I do not refer to the *most*, but “to the *more* highly gifted men” being successful in the battle for life; I referred to my supposition of the men in any country being divided into two equal bodies—viz., the more and the less highly gifted, and to the former on an average succeeding best.<sup>33</sup>

Darwin is not suggesting here that these two equal bodies band together as societies within a larger society to fight each other in the “battle for life.” The clear implication is that each person would succeed based on his or her own individual abilities in competition with fellow citizens. So, despite his treatment of collectivist competition as a part of the struggle for existence, it is clear that this did not hinder Darwin in the slightest from seeing a simultaneous rivalry between individuals within the same society.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence proving Darwin’s advocacy of individualist economic competition on the basis of his biological theory is a letter I discovered by Darwin to Heinrich Fick in 1872.<sup>34</sup> The entire letter is interesting and revealing in relation to Darwin’s social views, so it is worth quoting in full:

July 26 [1872]

Down  
Beckenham, Kent

Dear Sir

I am much obliged for your kindness in having sent me your essay, which I have read with very great interest. Your view of the daughters of short-lived parents inheriting property at an early age, and thus getting married with its consequences, is an original and quite new idea to me. So would have been what you say about soldiers, had I not read an article published about a year ago by a German (name forgotten just at present) who takes nearly the same view with yours, and thus accounts for great military nations having had a short existence.

I much wish that you would sometimes take occasion to discuss an allied point, if it holds good on the continent, —namely the rule insisted on by all our Trades-Unions, that all workmen, —the good and bad, the strong and weak, —sh[oul]d all work for the same number of hours and receive the same wages. The unions are also opposed to piece-work, —in short to all competition. I fear that Cooperative Societies, which many look at as the main hope for the future, likewise exclude competition. This seems to me a great evil for the future progress of mankind. —Nevertheless under any system, temperate and frugal workmen will have an advantage and leave more offspring than the drunken and reckless. —



With my best thanks for the interest which I have received from your Essay, and with my respect, I remain, Dear Sir  
Yours faithfully

Ch. Darwin<sup>35</sup>

Fick, a law professor at the University of Zurich, was zealous to apply Darwin's theory to all realms of human endeavor, including law and politics. In the essay sent to Darwin, Fick's concern was that degeneration might result from the policy requiring strong men to serve in the military, while the weak are exempted, giving the latter an unfair advantage in propagating the species. The government should remedy this situation that it has created by imposing legal restrictions on marriage for those not fit for military service. Although this involved some government intervention, it was intervention to alleviate a problem created by government policies. It is also interesting to note that this is not intervention on behalf of the poor or weak, but on behalf of the stronger members of society. Fick also warned against attempts to create social equality, which would only benefit the weaker members and produce degeneration.<sup>36</sup>

Darwin's response to Fick seems positive and illustrates his willingness to apply his theory to social and political questions. He not only prodded Fick to continue making social applications of his theory, but he suggested an issue of grave significance to him. More importantly, Darwin clearly was linking success in economic competition to natural selection, and he opposed limitations on this competition, even if organized by the workers themselves. His theory did militate toward unrestrained economic competition, or at least that was his view.

When the Rudolf Virchow-Ernst Haeckel debate over the connection of Darwinism to socialism erupted in 1877-78, Darwin clearly identified with Haeckel and the antisocialist Darwinists. He was appalled at Virchow's "foolish idea" that Darwinian theory might foster socialism and applauded Huxley for giving Virchow a "tremendous rap on the knuckles" for having linked Darwinism with socialism.<sup>37</sup> After reading the English translation of Haeckel's polemic against Virchow, *Freedom in Science and Teaching* (1879), he wrote to Haeckel, "I admire the whole of it. It is a most interesting essay, and I agree with all of it."<sup>38</sup> Since Haeckel dedicated an entire chapter to the demolition of socialism on the basis of Darwinism, Darwin was implicitly giving support to Haeckel's Social Darwinist views. Haeckel argued in *Freedom in Science* that Darwinism proves the necessity of economic competition and inequality. Thus Darwinism, according to Haeckel, supports an aristocratic view of society, not a socialist one (Haeckel favored an aristocracy of talent, not the landed aristocracy).<sup>39</sup>

While Darwin did not generally enter the public forum to debate overtly political and social issues, his most effective and vocal supporter, Thomas Henry Huxley, sometimes did. Huxley is usually remembered as a doughty opponent of Social Darwinism, since in his famous Romanes Lecture (1893) he refuted the notion that ethics and morality could be based on the laws of nature. He concluded that evolution had nothing to say about ethics, which was inextricably opposed to nature, not in harmony with it. In addition, in some of his essays on social and political themes, he attacked the doctrine of laissez-faire.<sup>40</sup> This would seem more than sufficient to remove him from suspicion of embracing Social Darwinism, especially in its individualist mode. However, despite his own caveat, Huxley did apply Darwinism and the precepts of nature to social and political thought.

In 1871 Huxley published an article dismissing *laissez-faire* as "Administrative Nihilism." He argued for a more pragmatic, case-by-case approach in deciding whether state involvement was appropriate, and he specifically favored government intervention in education, public health and hygiene, and other noneconomic areas. However, he also asserted that direct government interference with commerce and industry is generally inimical to the economy, stating that

science (in the shape of Political Economy) has readily demonstrated that self-interest may be safely left to find the best way of attaining its ends. . . . it is not more apparent why *laissez-faire*—great and beneficial as it may be in all that relates to the accumulation of wealth—should be the one great commandment which the State is to obey in all other matters.<sup>41</sup>

Thus Huxley actually was supportive of economic *laissez-faire*, which he calls "great and beneficial." He was only arguing against the application of the principle of *laissez-faire* to "all other matters," i.e., noneconomic social policy. He was opposing anarchism and more radical *laissez-faire* theories of government (such as Spencer's), not the *laissez-faire* theories of classical political economy. Huxley's position in this 1871 essay can by no means be characterized as Social Darwinism, though, since he never even mentioned Darwinism, natural science, nor any principles derived from them.

However, Huxley clearly spelled out some of the social consequences of Darwinian theory in his 1888 article, "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society." He, like Darwin, believed that Malthusian population pressure among humans produced an ineluctable struggle for existence, which manifests itself either as war or as economic competition, both among individuals and nations. This struggle is rather severe, but nonetheless unavoidable:

And that which I wish to point out is that, so long as the natural man increases and multiplies without restraint, so long will peace and industry not only permit, but they will necessitate, a struggle for existence as sharp as any that ever went on under the *régime* of war.<sup>42</sup>

When the anarchist Peter Kropotkin criticized Huxley's article for its Malthusian pessimism, Huxley privately wrote that Kropotkin was raising irrelevant objections, because even if agricultural production could be raised to a level sufficient to feed all the present inhabitants of the world, as Kropotkin claimed, nevertheless, "There must be some limit to the production of food by a given area, and there is none to population."<sup>43</sup> In an 1891 essay on social problems Huxley also justified industrial competition as a phase of the struggle for existence.<sup>44</sup>

In 1890 Huxley wrote a series of political essays decrying the application of a priori reasoning to political and socioeconomic problems. He castigated Rousseau, Henry George, and others for endorsing such pernicious doctrines as human equality, natural rights, and natural law. The primary problem with such political theory, according to Huxley, is that it does not take into account or wishes away the most vexing and inescapable problem facing humanity—overpopulation—which ensures the continuation of the struggle for existence in human society. It further ignores the natural, biological inequalities among people. Huxley maintained that social and economic inequality were the by-products of biological inequality and could thus not be abolished. He made this point rather crudely: "proclaim human equality as loudly as you like, Witless will serve his brother." One of his essays devoted to defending the accumulation of capital was subtitled "An Economical Problem Discussed from a Physiological Point of View," implying biologi-

cal authority for his economic views. However, apart from the opening of the essay with its biological analogy, biology does not play a particularly central role in his defense of capitalism. Although Huxley was not explicitly supporting laissez-faire economics on the basis of Darwinism in all these articles, he was clearly promoting economic competition and inequality on the basis of Darwinian theory and his views militated toward laissez-faire.<sup>45</sup>

Even in his famous Romanes Lecture, where he placed ethics in opposition to the laws of nature and the struggle for existence, Huxley expressed the conviction that humans are nevertheless still in many ways subject to laws of nature and can by no means ignore them. He reiterated his argument that overpopulation is inevitable, making the struggle for existence inescapable. However, "there is a general consensus that the ape and tiger methods of the struggle for existence are not reconcilable with sound ethical principles," and Huxley earnestly desired that ethics would mitigate the harsher effects of the struggle. Nonetheless, he was not particularly optimistic that human ethical sentiments would completely prevail in the immediate future, for "the instinct of unlimited self-assertion" is inherent in every human and has been strengthened through eons of exercise. "Ethical nature may count upon having to reckon with a tenacious and powerful enemy as long as the world lasts."<sup>46</sup>

Since Darwin and Huxley both legitimated the application of Darwinism to social and political issues, they were undoubtedly Social Darwinists in the broad sense of the term. Moreover, the specific social and economic position they upheld is congruent with Hofstadterian laissez-faire Social Darwinism. Both considered the Malthusian population principle and the concomitant struggle for existence among humans an ineluctable process ultimately benefitting humanity. The struggle occurs at two levels simultaneously—between societies and within them. The collective competition might manifest itself in war, but the individualist struggle was generally more peaceful economic competition. Nevertheless, the individualist form of struggle could be quite unpleasant (or perhaps even brutal) at times, as Darwin and Huxley admitted, but they saw no way of preventing it. Moreover, they did not think that economic competition should be restricted too much, for that would stymie progress and maybe even lead to degeneration.

Inequality in human society was another key idea that Darwin and Huxley defended on the basis of their biological theory. Darwin's theory of human evolution was only plausible if he could show that there were significant variations among humans, just as he endeavored to break down the notion of the homogeneity of all the other species. Both Darwin and Huxley advocated social structures that allowed the more talented to advance and the less competent to sink. They advocated economic inequality and the accumulation of wealth as necessary for the progress of humanity.

However, despite their justification of economic competition, inequality, capitalism, and private property, they did not believe that this competition was necessarily cruel and heartless, since humans also have ethical instincts, which prompt them to care for the poor and weak. They believed that the human struggle for existence favored those individuals with more talent and abilities and even with more highly refined ethical instincts, not the more devious and brutal members of society. They also did not apply laissez-faire to the realm of social policy, and Huxley argued forthrightly against Spencer's attempt to do so. Nevertheless, their views on economics were laissez-faire, and they upheld a competitive view of society in which individualist economic competition plays a significant role, though not to the exclusion of collective competition. However, the struggle is conditioned by social solidarity and ethical instincts and is thus not merely a free-for-all in a capitalist jungle.

## NOTES

1. A good treatment of the historiographical debate over Malthus's influence on Darwin is in David R. Oldroyd, "How Did Darwin Arrive at His Theory? The Secondary Literature to 1982," *History of Science* 22 (1984), 325–74.
2. Silvan S. Schweber, "Darwin and the Political Economists: Divergence of Character," *Journal of the History of Biology* 13 (1980), 195–289.
3. Robert Young, "Darwinism Is Social," in David Kohn, ed., *The Darwinian Heritage*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 609–38; John C. Greene, "Darwin as a Social Evolutionist," in idem, ed., *Science, Ideology and World View: Essays in the History of Evolutionary Ideas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 95–127; James Moore, "Socializing Darwinism: Historiography and the Fortunes of a Phrase," in Les Levidow, ed., *Science as Politics* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), 38–80; Silvan S. Schweber, "The Wider British Context in Darwin's Theorizing," in Kohn, *Darwinian Heritage*, 37–38; Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991); see also Elliot Sobor, "Darwin on Natural Selection: A Philosophical Perspective," in Kohn, *Darwinian Heritage*, 869. A recent keen analysis of Social Darwinism is Mike Hawkins in *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); he includes Darwin in the ranks of Social Darwinists.
4. Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 15; others defending Darwin from the charge of Social Darwinism include Peter J. Bowler, *Charles Darwin: The Man and His Influence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 196–98; Howard E. Gruber, *Darwin on Man: A Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 70, 240–41; James Allen Rogers, "Darwinism and Social Darwinism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (1972), 280; Howard L. Kaye, *The Social Meaning of Modern Biology: From Social Darwinism to Sociobiology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 18–19; Alexander Alland, Jr., *Human Nature: Darwin's View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 19–23.
5. For an interesting analysis of Spencer as a Social Darwinist, see Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*.
6. Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, 8–9, 164–66, 180–81, 226–28, quote at 15; Bannister's position has been defended by Donald C. Bellomy, "Social Darwinism Revisited," *Perspectives in American History*, 1 (n.s.) 1984, 2, 5–6, 38, 100; and Paul Crook, *Darwinism, War, and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the "Origin of Species" to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). This position has strongly influenced the work of Alfred Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin: The Popularization of Darwinism in Germany, 1860–1914* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); and Linda L. Clark, *Social Darwinism in France* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984). A more balanced perspective is Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction between Biological and Social Theory* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980).
7. Mike Hawkins (*Social Darwinism*) points out that Social Darwinism did not necessarily entail laissez-faire economic views, but according to his definition Social Darwinists did embrace the Malthusian population principle and the necessity of human competition; laissez-faire was one prominent ideology built on a Social Darwinist world view.
8. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, rev. ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1955), 5–6, *passim*.
9. Many late-twentieth-century conservatives advocate both laissez-faire economics and militarism, after all.
10. Arthur J. Taylor, *Laissez-Faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1972), *passim*; Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, *Political Economy and Laissez-Faire: Economics and Ideology in the Ricardian Era* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), 35, 38, 129; H. Scott Gordon, "The Ideology of Laissez-Faire," in A. W. Coats, ed., *The Classical Economists and Economic Policy*, (London: Methuen, 1971), 180–205; Norman Gash, *Aristocracy and People: Britain, 1815–1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 44–47. On J. S. Mill's views on laissez-faire, see Robert Heilbroner, *Teachings from the Worldly Philosophy* (New York: Norton, 1996), 151–57.
11. Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, ed. Leonard Engel (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 230–31.

12. Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, xxi, 24, 135, 146, 218, 334, and *passim*.
13. Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London: Penguin Books, 1968 [1859 edition]), 117. He expressed his full approval of Malthus's population principle in Darwin to Alfred Russell Wallace, 5 July 1866, in *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (New York: Appleton, 1903), 1: 271.
14. Darwin, *Origin*, 126.
15. *Ibid.*, 230.
16. Edward Manier, *The Young Darwin and His Cultural Circle* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978); 13, 180–81; see also Gillian Beer, "Darwin's Reading and the Fictions of Development," in Kohn, *Darwinian Heritage*, 568.
17. Darwin, *Origin*, 116.
18. *Ibid.*, 117. This definition is in the paragraph immediately following Darwin's discussion of the metaphorical uses of the term.
19. Marx to Engels, 18 June 1862, in *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1959ff.), 30: 249.
20. Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), chap. 5. The best treatment of Darwin's views on morality is Robert J. Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chaps. 2–5.
21. Darwin, *Descent*, 1: 10, 131–32, 185.
22. *Ibid.*, 1:180.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 2: 403.
25. *Ibid.*, 1: 169–71.
26. Darwin to Alfred Russell Wallace, 28 May 1864, in *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, 2: 34.
27. Darwin, *Descent*, 1: 169–71.
28. *Ibid.*, 1: 167–69.
29. Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, 625 and *passim*.
30. H. Thiel, "Ueber einige Formen der landwirthschaftlichen Genossenschaften," in *Mittheilungen der königlichen landwirthschaftlichen Akademie Poppelsdorf* 1 (1868): 132, 134, 143–45.
31. Darwin to Hugo Thiel, 25 February 1869, in Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (New York: Appleton, 1919), 2: 293–94.
32. Darwin to Preyer, 29 March 1869, in W. Preyer, "Briefe von Darwin. Mit Erinnerungen und Erläuterungen," *Deutsche Rundschau*, 67 (1891), 362.
33. Darwin to John Morley, 24 March 1871, in *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, 1: 326.
34. This letter is not listed in *The Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, but has recently been published in Richard Weikart, "A Recently Discovered Darwin Letter on Social Darwinism," *Isis* 86 (1995), 609–11.
35. Facsimile copy in Helene Fick, *Heinrich Fick. Ein Lebensbild* (Zurich: Leemann, 1908), 2: 314–15.
36. Heinrich Fick, "Ueber den Einfluss der Naturwissenschaft auf das Recht," in Fick, *Heinrich Fick*, 2: 289, 292–93, 304–5, 311–12.
37. Darwin to Dr. Scherzer, 26 December 1879, in *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 2: 413; Darwin to Thomas H. Huxley, 19 April 1879, in *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, 1: 383.
38. Darwin to Haeckel, 29 April 1879, Ernst-Haeckel-Haus, Jena.
39. Ernst Haeckel, *Freie Wissenschaft und freie Lehre* (Stuttgart: Schweizerbart'sche Verlagshandlung, 1878), 72–75.
40. James G. Paradis, *T. H. Huxley: Man's Place in Nature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 181–83.
41. T. H. Huxley, "Administrative Nihilism," in *idem*, *Collected Essays*, vol. 1: *Method and Results* (London: Macmillan, 1893; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 261, 279, 281–83, quote at 268.
42. T. H. Huxley, "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society," in *idem*, *Collected Essays*, vol. 9: *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1894; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 205–12, quote at 208. Huxley also expressed his views on the population dilemma in a letter to James Knowles, 1 June 1888, in Leonard Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* (London: Macmillan, 1900), 2: 199.
43. Huxley, *Life and Letters of T. H. Huxley*, 2: 199.
44. T. H. Huxley, "Social Diseases and Worse Remedies," in *idem*, *Collected Essays*, 9: 288.

45. T. H. Huxley, "On the Natural Inequality of Men," in idem, *Collected Essays*, 1: 301-9, 312-13, 328-29, 334; "Natural Rights and Political Rights," in idem, *Collected Essays*, 1: 337-38, 345-50, 357, 359-63; idem, "Government: Anarchy or Regimentation," in idem, *Collected Essays*, 1: 427-28, 430; idem, "Capital—The Mother of Labour: An Economical Problem Discussed from a Physiological Point of View," in idem, *Collected Essays*, 9: 147-87.
46. T. H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics," in idem, *Collected Essays*, 9: 17-23, 43, quotes at 52-53, 85.