

Off-Duty Darwinism

Patrick Wolfe

Ronald L. Numbers and John Stenhouse (eds)

Disseminating Darwinism:

The Role of Place, Race, Religion, and Gender

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IN AN ERA dominated by the doctrine of progress, it was no more possible for Charles Darwin to invent the idea of evolution than it would be possible for a contemporary American to invent the month of September. Rather than the concept of evolution, which was already in the woodwork of nineteenth-century British culture, Darwin (along with Alfred Wallace, but that is another story) proposed a set of principles that explained how evolution worked. The centre-piece of this explanation was the interaction of two natural processes: spontaneous generation and natural selection. The concept of spontaneous generation discarded the long-standing belief in like engendering like, proposing that, rather than reproducing themselves accurately, species produced offspring that included a range of mutations that differed, to varying extents, from the parent stock. Most of these mutations simply fell by the wayside. Some, however, turned out to be better adapted (or 'preadapted') to their context than their more faithfully reproduced fellows. These mutants were favoured in the battle for life — a metaphor derived from free-market ideology — with the result that their strain ended up prevailing over the original species, only to be subsequently usurped by new mutants who were better adapted to the ever-changing local environment, and so on. This, very roughly, of course, was the principle of natural selection. In their interaction, these principles eliminated the various teleological ghosts (God, destiny etc.) that had previously been held to drive the machine of evolution, replacing them with a vision of species transmutation that was natural, undirected and radically context-specific.

The breakthrough achieved by Darwin's naturalism was the lack of a cosmic plan. Hence the theological controversy that it generated. In other respects, however, Darwin was more straightforwardly a man of his time. As a number of historians have pointed out, his notebooks contain various passages that presuppose the directed social evolutionism (orchestrated by God the Englishman) that his theory overturned. Thus we have to distinguish between strict Darwin and, as it were, off-duty Darwin. Maintaining this distinction is not as easy as it may seem, largely on account of the

intellectual hegemony of a misnomer, 'social Darwinism'. Rather than maintaining the crucial principle of natural selection informing strict Darwinism, social Darwinism, which was principally associated with the name of Herbert Spencer, and might more reasonably be called social Lamarckism, translated the imperialist ideology of progress (off-duty Darwinism) into a bogus science of human development. To illustrate the chasm between the two: whereas social Darwinism depicted evolution as a hierarchical process culminating in civilised Western man, strict Darwinism would have no problem with ants taking over after a nuclear war.

The tension between strict Darwinism and transformist evolutionary schemes not founded on natural selection is central to *Disseminating Darwinism*. In my view, the best chapters (those by Eric Anderson, Scott Appleby, David Livingstone and Jon Roberts) are also those that most explicitly acknowledge this tension. With one exception, the collection originated as papers presented to a conference held in Dunedin in 1994. As if guided by a hidden hand (or, as is more likely, by determined convenors), the contributors bring a strikingly consistent set of concerns to bear on their separate accounts of the ways in which Darwinism was received, interpreted and rhetorically deployed by different interest groups in different parts of the English-speaking world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though case studies from the USA predominate, there are separate studies of Darwinism's reception in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, together with Livingstone's remarkable comparative study of the different ways in which idiosyncratic versions of Darwinism were put to polemical use by Presbyterian divines in Princeton, Belfast and Edinburgh. There are also studies of élite appropriations of Darwinism within a range of ostensibly discrete American social groups whose conspicuous overlap escapes attention: Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Blacks and women.

This book's significance lies not so much in its geographic and demographic scope, however, as in the uniformity with which its authors argue that small-scale local factors determined how Darwinism was received, constructed and contested in each of these different settings. Particularity is the collection's general characteristic. As one contributor puts it: 'The cumulative effect of these investigations is to draw attention to the local, regional, and national features of science — an enterprise hitherto regarded as prototypically universal.' Darwin himself might well have approved of the idea of different Darwinisms developing, Galapagos-style, in different contexts. For the general reader, however, this degree of particularism can read as one Darwin thing after another. Take, for instance, Marc Swetlitz's conclusion to two and a half pages of close exegesis: 'Wise's lecture series, reprinted weekly in *The Israelite*, did not generate any debate' (a few pages further on, a Methodist clergyman does somewhat better: 'Mitchell's refutation of evolution received

a favorable response by [*sic*] at least one Jewish reader'). Yet it is worth persevering with the details, since princes can surface among the frogs: in Swetlitz's case, for instance, the provincial intricacies of debate come to suggest something significant about the politics of science once we have been told that 'when rabbis and lay leaders discussed evolution, they were typically more concerned with the specter of materialism and its supposed effects on lowering synagogue attendance than with the details of evolutionary theory'.

In apologetic contexts such as this, it makes sense that the niceties of strict Darwinism should not be selectively favoured. Rather, any old developmental notion will do so long as it can be mobilised to strategic ends. Thus Appleby concludes that, in the USA, the Catholic response to Darwinism 'revealed as much about the mind-set and internal struggles of the polyglot, urbanizing, immigrant Catholic community as it did about the scientific theory'. Such grounded pragmatic insights are a return on this collection's local-contextual emphasis, and constitute an undeniable strength. Consider, for instance, Ronald Numbers and Lester Stephens's shrewd observation that Darwinism was not always so repugnant to the mind of the South as the creationist hysteria about it would suggest — rather, 'the very success of Darwinism in the South contributed significantly to the outburst of antievolutionism in the 1920s'. Other agreeable surprises include John Stenhouse's observation that Darwinism fared relatively well in New Zealand for the simple reason that science did not get off the ground there until late in the piece, which meant that there was no pre-Darwinian scientific establishment to impede its acceptance, and Suzanne Zeller's conclusion that, in Canada, the adoption of harder versions of Darwinism reflected the modernising processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and immigration, whereby 'wilderness became cottage country' and the majority of Canadians became alienated from the natural environment.

As this last example suggests, however, the mere fact that something takes place in a definable local context does not mean that its explanation can be confined to that context alone. The point has political implications. Particularism has long proved congenial to conservative analysis for the reason that it screens out wider structures of inequality. In the case of this book, for example, though editors and cover-blurb writers make much of its global scope, every single one of the case studies takes place in a site of English settler-colonisation. Yet, with the notable exception of Stenhouse's remarks on Maori resistance, the essays do not discuss colonialism. In the nineteenth-century context, Darwinism without colonialism is a horse without a course. In an even more general sense, neither the editors nor the other contributors question why Darwinism should have been so urgently on the agenda in all these different places at the same time. It can hardly have been coincidence. Thus we are led

back to the wider structures that the local focus obscures. How was it that Darwinism could encompass such a wide range of contexts? What was the source of its extraordinary ideological versatility?

To address such questions, we have to be clear as to the type of Darwinism we are talking about. The Darwinism that proved itself so rhetorically flexible in the various local contexts discussed in this book was not strict Darwinism but the imperialist hotchpotch that made up nineteenth-century developmental ideology as a whole. As such, there was nothing coherent or specific about it, and there is little wonder that it could be so promiscuously applied. Indeed, one of the more astonishing global accomplishments of imperialist ideology has been its capacity to hide itself behind the name of a single human being. If any old developmental hierarchy — Spencer, Lamarck, theistic evolution, you name it — can count as Darwinism, then what is so special about Darwinism? And yet, if *Disseminating Darwinism* had limited itself to strict Darwinism and excluded the misnomer, it would have had much less local variety to discuss. In the end, therefore, this book's local focus is of a piece with its screening-out of imperialism.