

The Danger of Social Darwinism-Judging from the History of the 20th Century

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Abstract: The idea of Social Darwinism was promoted by Herbert Spencer and it was quite popular until in the Second World War to reach its summit, with hazardous impact on the human society. This paper uses quantitative approach and literature research to discuss the danger of Social Darwinism.

Keywords: Social Darwinism; Nationalism; Quantitative approach; Sociology

1. Introduction

1.1 Brief Introduction about the Topic

Herbert Spencer, an English philosopher of 19th century, was famous for promoting the idea of Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is an application of the theory of natural selection to social, political, and economic issues. In its simplest form, Social Darwinism follows the rule of “the struggle for survival” or “the struggle for the fittest”, which is an account of development of human freedom and a defense of individual liberty based on the evolution theory.

In 20th century, Social Darwinism was quite popular until in the Second World War to reach its summit. Because during that very special period, the view “natural selection and survival of the fittest” deeply affected the society, no matter Western countries or Eastern countries, they believed winner takes all. Such as America, they cruelly treated with the aboriginals for territory strongly confirmed that view.

This paper tries to look at the dangerous thoughts and severe consequences brought by the Social Darwinism in that special period of 20th century, to reveal the rationale of it and to warn what it will bring to the future if it loses control, which will be a reference and an alarm to the 21th century.

1.2 Research Method

The main methods of this paper are quantitative approach and literature research, which widely referring to the domestic and foreign literature materials. On basis of reference and analysis, this paper is trying to discuss the hazard of Social Darwinism.

2. The Body

2.1 Social Darwinism in the 20th Century

In the middle of the 20th century, the international relationship entered a turbulent era. This change was the inevitable result of unbalance development in economy and politics among the European capitalist countries.

2.2 Social Darwinism in Europe

At first, the appearance of Social Darwinism was widely popular in European countries, frequently becoming the important principles and theoretical basis of imperialism and colonialism. Then, it changed its targets from the colonial people to working class and other labors, which became “class ethnocentrism” and such false theory that working class was treated as “inferior race” was became a fad of the time. An English political commentator wrote that “the poor in the city are tribe wandering everywhere in the cultural society”, and “characterized with all inferior race features”. The France psychologist Gustave Le Bon even came up with the following analysis: “what constitutes the superiority of one race over another is that the superior race contains many more voluminous skulls than the inferior race;” (McClelland, 151-181) “the difference existing between the brain weight of a man and woman progressively increases as a people’s level of civilization rises.” (Eley, Geoff, 284)

2.3 Social Darwinism and The World War

In 1873, in *The Study of Sociology*, Spencer applied Darwinism theories to the development of human societies and coined a phrase “survival of the fittest” in both social and biological field in 1864.

2.3.1 The First World War

With the influence of Social Darwinism, the new arising capitalist powers attempted to re-divide the world and finally brought with the First World War. It lasted for 4 years and 3 months; 1.5 billion people were involved in war, which accounted for more than 75% of the world population. And 70 million people were sent to battle field and more than 30 million dead or wounded, about 10

million people died of hunger and disasters in war, 270 billion dollars loss in total among belligerent countries. (Modern History of the World, Chapter 2)

And war also boosted the development of science, scientific technology made the war weapons change rapidly. The tank and poison gas were taken into battle for the first time. In 1869, Francis Galton published Hereditary Genius that resulted from his research about many prestigious family lineages. And Galton believed that according to his research, there were strong evidence to show, personal abilities were mainly came from inheritance not afterwards education. That is to say, “the fittest” and “non-fittest” are decided by natural born. At the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21th century, eugenics wildly spread around the whole world. In 1895, Kaiser Wilhelm II von Deutschland announced to the whole world: “German Reich will become the world Empire... German goods, knowledge, diligence, will go abroad...” which was published in Germany; many scholars turned racial eugenics into international eugenics, and set up the first international eugenics organization in 1905. Eugenics came into America in 1903, and Eugenics Research Association was set up and later changed name into American Genetic Association.

2.3.2 The Second World War

Until the end of the First World War did zero basic contradictory between Western powers solved, but to burdened the conflict between victorious nations and defeated states.

And the social environment was Social Darwinism was highly supported and acknowledged. The famous philosopher Nietzsche held the view that the masses are worthless. And for higher class themselves shall cultivate their own fertilizer in the masses who are just like the mud in hand, in order to reach the purpose of the high class. Nietzsche claimed that the masses shall not against the high class and prepare to sacrifice themselves for the coming of “superior races”. And being obedient to the high class would save the masses. (Kellner, 77–89) And by that social discussion and environment Hitler put such ideas into practice.

2.4 Why Social Darwinism Popular in the 20th Century

Firstly, Social Darwinism was the basic theory and spiritual core of German militarism and Nazism during the World War. And with the international background of colonization, the Western powers made their capitalist primitive accumulation by plundering and killing, with capital they robbed they began to devote money into their economical industries, and booming economy further boosted their believes in “the survival for the fittest”.

Secondly, Spencer said that the powerful and wealthy were this way because they were biologically and evolutionarily superior to the struggling masses. Human beings are more social than animals, so they could occupy more resources than animals and take advantages of other creatures.

Thirdly, the Second War criminal Hitler drew his racial and social policies from Social Darwinism ideas, and he wanted to build his country of his favored races, he catered to many European’s thoughts that they are the superior races in the world and they could take away what they want if they show more powerful.

3. The Enclosure

As a result of social class, nationalism actually was hierarchical. So the fascism could not be it once advertised to transcend class contradictions but to sharpen the extreme nationalism. And dating back to the development trace of extreme nationalism, it showed how fascism was born. (Qiu Haiyan, 3-4) Although extreme nationalism was not equal to fascism, but eliminates extreme nationalism is a necessary step and requirement to fully end the fascism.

And Social Darwinism did far-reaching impact on Chinese society. Since the First Opium War (Britain’s invasion of China, 1840-1842), China was forced to open its door. So when the ideas of Social Darwinism “the strong survive” got strong attention and response. Many advanced intellectuals accepted Social Darwinism without hesitation. In nowadays, some parts of China still remain the slogan such as “backward nations tend to get beaten up”. Yan Fu translated the book Evolution and Ethics of Thomas Huxley in 1893, and wanted to lead Chinese to ponder problems of race and racial strength. So Chinese could achieve such strong belief of survival with power and awareness. But time is different now, we shall learn from history, and cherish the peace life and control the rise of extreme nationalism. As the biggest developing country, China faces environmental problems, ecological crisis, intellectual crisis and many other problems. Chinese is advocating to build a harmonious society, holding back the growth of Social Darwinism, sticking to sustainable development and scientific development.

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