
A Recently Discovered Darwin Letter on Social Darwinism

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Recently Discovered Darwin Letter on Social Darwinism

*By Richard Weikart**

SINCE CHARLES DARWIN'S VIEWS on social and economic issues have been an issue of debate among those writing on social Darwinism for the past two decades, the recent discovery of a letter from Darwin to Heinrich Fick that addresses this issue will surely be of interest. As most Darwin scholars are aware, Darwin rarely discussed socio-economic matters in his correspondence. In an 1873 letter thanking Karl Marx for a copy of *Das Kapital*, he admitted his ignorance of economics. In 1869, after a German economist, Hugo Thiel, sent him an article on economic applications of Darwinism, Darwin wrote: "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."¹ However, in 1993 I turned up a letter in which Darwin candidly discussed some of his economic views and how his theory relates to economics. It is the strongest piece of evidence of which I am aware that Darwin himself believed that his biological theory lent support to individualist economic competition and laissez-faire economics.

Darwin's appropriation of Thomas Malthus's population principle and the social views expressed in *The Descent of Man* should be enough to link him with laissez-faire economics, and many Darwin scholars have demonstrated the tight relationship between Darwin-

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¹ Charles Darwin to Hugo Thiel, 25 Feb. 1869, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1919), Vol. 2, pp. 293–294. For the letter to Marx, dated 1 Oct. 1873, see Ralph Colp, Jr., "The Contacts between Karl Marx and Charles Darwin," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1974, 35:334.

ism and laissez-faire economics.² However, numerous scholars have remained unconvinced about Darwin's personal predilection for laissez-faire social Darwinism, and Robert Bannister and other revisionists have denied that social Darwinism existed at all as a significant intellectual position.³

Skepticism concerning Darwin's own views on economic competition will be much more difficult after reading his letter to Fick, which was previously unknown to Darwin scholars and is not listed in *The Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin*.⁴ It was cited in at least three German publications—two of them very obscure—none of which was primarily about Darwin or Darwinism. Thus it escaped the attention of Darwin scholars.

Heinrich Fick was a law professor at the University of Zurich who believed that Darwin's theory could be fruitfully applied to legislation. On 7 March 1872 he delivered a speech in Zurich, "Ueber den Einfluss der Naturwissenschaft auf Das Recht" ("On the Influence of Natural Science on Law"), which he published the same year in *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*. He sent Darwin a copy of the essay, in which he argued that the military policies of most European countries were detrimental to their national health and vigor. Requiring the strong young men to serve in the military while exempting the weak, he insisted, would grant a selective advantage to the weaker members in the human struggle for existence. They could marry earlier and would avoid death in battle. He suggested that the government place some restrictions on marriage for those ineligible for military service. Further, he used Darwinism to oppose attempts to create socioeconomic equality, for this too would benefit the weak and lead to degeneration.⁵

² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), Vol. 1, p. 180, Vol. 2, p. 403 (this edition reprints the two-volume 1871 edition in one volume but retains the original pagination). See Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, rev. ed. (New York: Braziller, 1955), pp. 5–6 and *passim*; Robert Young, "Darwinism Is Social," in *The Darwinian Heritage*, ed. David Kohn (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 609–638; John C. Greene, "Darwin as a Social Evolutionist," in *Science, Ideology, and World View: Essays in the History of Evolutionary Ideas* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1981), pp. 95–127; Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Joseph, 1991); Moore, "Socializing Darwinism: Historiography and the Fortunes of a Phrase," in *Science as Politics*, ed. Les Levidow (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp. 38–80; and Silvan S. Schweber, "Darwin and the Political Economists: Divergence of Character," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 1980, 13:195–289.

³ Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1979), p. 15 and *passim*. Others defending Darwin from the charge of social Darwinism include Peter J. Bowler, *Charles Darwin: The Man and His Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 196–198; Howard E. Gruber, *Darwin on Man: A Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 70, 240–241; James Allen Rogers, "Darwinism and Social Darwinism," *J. Hist. Ideas*, 1972, 33:280; Howard L. Kaye, *The Social Meaning of Modern Biology: From Social Darwinism to Sociobiology* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 18–19; and Alexander Alland, Jr., *Human Nature: Darwin's View* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 19–23. Bannister's position has also been defended by Donald C. Bellomy, "'Social Darwinism' Revisited," *Perspectives in American History*, N.S., 1984, 1:2, 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 Univ. Press, 1994); and it has strongly influenced the work of Alfred Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin: The Popularization of Darwinism in Germany, 1860–1914* (Chapel Hill: Univ. North Carolina Press, 1981), and Linda L. Clark, *Social Darwinism in France* (University: Univ. Alabama Press, 1984). A more balanced perspective is offered by Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction between Biological and Social Theory* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1980).

⁴ Frederick Burkhardt, Sydney Smith, David Kohn, and William Montgomery, eds., *A Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin, 1821–1882* (New York/London: Garland, 1985).

⁵ Heinrich Fick, "Ueber den Einfluss der Naturwissenschaft auf Das Recht," *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, 1872, 18:248–277. The speech is reprinted in Helene Fick, *Heinrich Fick: Ein Lebensbild* (Zurich: Leemann, 1908); see Vol. 2, pp. 289, 292–293, 304–305, 311–312.

The following is Darwin's full response:

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)⁶ 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. Darwin⁷

Darwin's response to Fick demonstrates conclusively that Darwin was not averse to making social and economic applications of his theory. He clearly linked economic success with selective fitness and thought his theory supported individualist economic competition.

⁶ Fick identified this person as H. Richter; see Helene Fick, *Heinrich Fick*, Vol. 2, p. 316.

⁷ For a facsimile of this letter see *ibid.*, pp. 314–315.