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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Social Darwinism and English Thought* by Greta Jones

Review by: Robert C. Bannister

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once attained must be recaptured. The poetic mind had to return to the world of reality and repeat the journey again and again; hence the appropriateness of "precarious enchantment."

Though intended as a reinterpretation of the major characters in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, *Beauchamp's Career*, *One of Our Conquerors*, and *The Amazing Marriage*, Shaheen's chapters wander afield and, in addition, are unnecessarily marred by obsessive quibbling with previous critics, whose words are paraphrased or quoted out of context and eccentrically cheapened. The formula is tedious and disconcertingly roundabout.

When Shaheen concentrates on offering his own insights, instead of taking issue with those of his rivals, he can be quite persuasive. One of his most penetrating comments concerns the heroine of *The Amazing Marriage*, and could be applied to nearly all Meredith's imaginatively sensitive characters: "The nature of development in Carinthia's character demonstrates Meredith's conception of romance as being a certain level of consciousness which is associated with innocence. It is one stage of reality where a simple but disturbed vision is dominant. With experience comes disillusion, developing a character's consciousness of reality. Realism here implies a change of sensibility and a narrowing of the distance between the reader and character" (p. 96).

WALTER F. WRIGHT

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Social Darwinism and English Thought, by Greta Jones; pp. xiv + 234. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980, £22.50; Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, \$37.50.

WHATEVER IT BECAME, SOCIAL DARWINISM was initially a British disease. The continental theorists who coined the term in the 1880s saw in Herbert Spencer's *Man vs. the State* (1884) the epitome of "le Darwinisme sociale." As it gained currency, the term was applied ubiquitously to diverse persuasions and soon lost its national identity. In his classic study (1944), Richard Hofstadter found its fullest expression not in Britain but the United States. Meanwhile, British

historians were curiously quiet. Until a decade ago only American scholars detected strains of social Darwinism in late Victorian thought. In the early 1970s the tide turned, ironically at a time when the Hofstadter thesis was under increasing attack in the United States. The present study, originally a dissertation at the London School of Economics, completes the trans-Atlantic transfer. A century after the phrase was coined, "social Darwinism" has come home.

By and large, the work is true to the Hofstadter tradition. Although the names are sometimes new, the taxonomy is a familiar one: radical individualists (Spencer and a "plethora" of unnamed defenders of "vulgar self-interest"); liberals, who stressed moral and intellectual evolution (Leslie Stephen, Frederick Clifford, Frederick Pollock); socialists and their "new liberal" adversaries (J. A. Hobson, L. T. Hobhouse, Graham Wallas); eugenicists and racists. Tracing the legacy into the modern period, the author adds to this list such figures as B. K. Malinowski, Talcott Parsons, and E. O. Wilson, despite the fact that the sociobiologists deny any affinity with nineteenth-century predecessors. Just as Hofstadter in the forties broadened current usage of social Darwinism, so Jones stretches its meaning even further. So also, she applies it exclusively to ideas and intellectual strategies she disapproves.

The protean definition of the term holds the key to a sometimes puzzling cast of characters. At times the author seems to accept the conventional view that social Darwinists were those who appropriated (rightly or wrongly) specifically Darwinian concepts of struggle and selection. But at others she identifies it with all attempts to find a "natural" underpinning for the social order, whether in the doctrine of the moral sense, the organic analogy, or instinct theory. A social Darwinist is anyone who grounds the social order in human nature, whether or not moral and intellectual qualities are included in this nature. On this criterion, Clifford and Stephen are social Darwinists for believing that values and sentiments hold society together, no less than eugenicists who proposed to replace natural with artificial selection.

The least satisfactory part of this study lies in the uncritical assumption that collectivists in the 1880s battled a majority of

“crude” individualists who had already appropriated Darwinism for their purposes. “Certainly Darwinism was used from the beginning as a defence of laissez faire capitalism,” Jones writes (p. 35). But the evidence for this statement, aside from *Man vs. the State*, consists entirely of the testimony of those who opposed an allegedly “brutal” individualism. Taking Spencer as representative of this unnamed legion, the book fails adequately to explore his relation to Darwinism, or its role in his growing isolation within the liberal mainstream. More importantly, it ignores the fact that the epithet “social Darwinism” was from the start a potent rhetorical weapon in the arsenal of those (whether new liberals or eugenists) who demanded a more active, interventionist role for government.

More than incidental, this distortion sets the stage for the argument that the moral and intellectual evolutionism of Stephen and Clifford, and the new liberalism that succeeded it, was “as hierarchial as most versions of social Darwinism which emphasized economic competition” (p. 52). Intellectual “fitness” merely replaced the economic sort, thus legitimating the role of the intellectual in politics. This conflation unfortunately obscures the significant impact of Darwinism on liberals from Stephen to Hobhouse. Although the author argues that there was “nothing implicit” in organicism or moral evolutionism that led to collectivism, the weight of the evidence suggests otherwise. Aside from eugenists (who often spiced their call for government action with some old-fashioned individualism), the new liberals and their socialist opponents, not the individualists, were Darwin’s heirs – however debatable their own rendering of the *Origin of Species* may now appear in light of more recent work in the history and philosophy of science.

Since Jones has little use for the new liberalism, or the functionalism that developed from it, these distinctions may appear as quibbles. “However many variations of social theory it has produced,” she concludes, “social Darwinism implies that individuals are allotted social places through their heredity or their moral choice” (p. 194). On this issue there is little to choose among modern functionalists, Edwardian new liberals, Spencerians, or even earlier “religious ideologies of social order.” Contemporary

sociobiologists “wrongly” distance their position from earlier social Darwinism by equating it exclusively with theories of individual and race conflict.

Despite an undercurrent of criticism of corporatist liberalism, and its “conservative,” hierarchical view of society, Jones offers no alternative to the hydraheaded social Darwinism she describes. Nor will this book, as provocative as it is, settle debate concerning the new liberalism that emerged at the turn of the century. Was it vital, responsive to the “social” problem, and sensitive in its balance of individual and community as Michael Freeden has argued in *The New Liberalism* (1978)? Or was it a “conservative” ploy to legitimate a new intelligentsia and the corporate state? In this debate the term “social Darwinism” has had a venerable place. But after reading this study one wonders whether either clarity or history is served by continuing the tradition.

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Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England, by F. K. Prochaska; pp. ix + 301. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, £15.95; New York: Oxford University Press, \$48.00.

THIS IS AN EXCELLENT BOOK OF ITS KIND. It is very well-documented with few original sources omitted. It is interesting to the uninitiated, and its thesis is easily understood. Though by no means an original contribution to the study of Victorian philanthropy, it fills in a certain number of gaps and brings to light some of the factors which lie hidden behind the great outburst of unpaid social work by women in the nineteenth century. It is divided into two parts: Part I, “The Power of the Purse,” which is concerned with the raising of money by women for charity; and Part II, “The Power of the Cross,” which attempts to link Christianity with the practical development of the work.

Women’s monetary contributions are outlined in Part I and supported by some comprehensive statistical tables which are as revealing about the particular charities concerned as they are about their cash amounts. This is valuable, original material, though it would have been improved if some compari-