

Can Democracy Survive the Disgust of Man for Man? From Social Darwinism to Eugenics

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In their major book devoted to the Herbert Spencer 'affair', Daniel Becquemont and Laurent Mucchielli profess themselves to be quite ready to share the opinion of Georges Guille-Escuret¹: the 19th-century British thinker would appear to dominate 'discreetly our spontaneous perceptions'². The forgotten philosopher in France appears to colour the moral atmosphere of the West. He appears to be, without our knowing it, our major contemporary. The surprising lapse of memory in which his name has found itself stuck fast appears to guarantee the triumph of his ideas. To unearth his name and resubmit his work to scrutiny takes on a certain urgent character when seen from this perspective: it would mean putting the so-called ideological evidence of our time to the test of the history of ideas. To render unto Spencer that which is Spencer's would be to remove from this so-called evidence the 'immediate and unquestionable character' with which it invests itself.

If I too have chosen to bring to light the most widely read thinker of the 19th century, it is because I share the opinion of the authors I have quoted. But it appears to me that the ideological evidence which we may have inherited from him is no less protected by being demonized than it is by a lapse of memory. For, although Spencer's name is no longer identified with any accuracy outside certain circles, yet the name given to his political thinking, 'social Darwinism', is frequently to be found in the press and in essays. For it often describes the simplistic apologia for everyone's war against everyone else and indeed even an aestheticization of violence. For Spencer was anything but an eulogist of actual brutality. 'Social Darwinism' often appears, quite wrongly, as a synonym for 'eugenics'. Finally, it is the case that any kind of political ideology with biological connotations is described as 'social Darwinism': but that prevents any distinction being made between the important scientist naturalisms of the 19th century. However, it is not the same thing as turning either 'race' or 'market' into absolutes, or declaring the most severe competition or the most touching mutual aid to be 'natural' and 'scientifically proved'! The best way of misinterpreting Spencer's political thinking is, for example, to understand it in the same context as the racist theories of his French contemporary, Georges Vacher de Lapouge³.

Let us define 'social Darwinism' as that extraordinarily influential 19th-century doctrine which claimed to synthesize the ideology of Progress, liberal economics and 'Darwinism' into a particularly implacable interpretation. I would invoke social Darwinism every time the following concepts are considered to be obvious and united: *Progress, competition, adaptation*. It is true that a fourth concept, no less emphatic but deliciously metaphorical, rarely fails to appeal: it is 'freedom'. In this discourse, 'freedom' is that rich dressing which is supposed to make the salad appetizing.

The necessary survival of the fittest is described as increasingly assured by the *humanization* of the 'natural' struggle of everyone against everyone else through economic competition. Herbert Spencer notably wrote: 'The poverty of the incompetent, the distress of the careless, the elimination of the lazy and that pressure of the strong which sweeps aside the weak and reduces so many of them to misery, are the necessary results of an enlightened and beneficial general law.' It will be noted that this historical optimism was fatalistic and that it concealed, as Emmanuel Mounier would have said, a 'radical pessimism of the person'. An edifying synthesis of anthropological pessimism and historical optimism, social Darwinism in a way exclaims: 'Everything is getting better and better with the worst people!'. To put it in the delicious manner of Célestin Bouglé, man is, for social Darwinism, no longer a 'fallen god' but a 'brute who is ascending'⁴.

This charming collaboration of the invisible hand and natural selection has not, however, kept all of its promises within time limits acceptable to human impatience. War against charity in the name of Progress has not had the effect anticipated by those who were advocating it. Demands for action swiftly increased when faced with the tough demands of survival or even with the proliferation of those supposed to be unfit. The anthropological pessimism of social Darwinism has slipped towards this voluntarist ideology which is eugenics. Herbert Spencer most certainly did not want this genuine *war against the unfit* which eugenics in the fullest sense of the term promoted in the end. The apostle of Progress and generalized *laissez-faire* was unable to approve of this swift State interventionism. But it has to be recognized that he has contributed to giving eugenics a high proportion of its anthropological premisses.

In his book on education, Spencer multiplies comparisons between the education of children and the rearing of animals in an almost obsessional fashion. This kind soul does not hide his indignation: 'Take the adult males of the kingdom and you will find that the vast majority are interested in questions of cross-breeding, rearing and education of animals of one kind or another. But who has ever heard a word said about the rearing of children, in after-dinner conversations or in that sort of talk?'⁵ The ideologist does not learn all the lessons from this comparison: he will disapprove of the rising eugenics. However, it is striking to notice that theories of eugenics appear to give Spencer's insistent metaphors the force of reality. The means change but the aim remains the same: the best possible adaptation to a society in which unrestrained competition gains approval as a fact of life. Eugenics completes and anticipates the pedagogy of 'training' which belongs to social Darwinism, through the practice of biological selection. Compassionately, it intends besides to *accelerate* the disappearance of the 'unfit', which social Darwinism describes as beneficial and inevitable.

As an unforgiving apostle of survival of the fittest but as much an enemy of authoritarian solutions as he was allergic to blood, Herbert Spencer might well have contributed powerfully to the very resurgence of this apparent 'archaism', violence, whose touching metamorphosis he had thought to relate. In spite of himself, the 'humanist' might have contributed to a terrible process of dehumanization.

If it is necessary to distinguish between social Darwinism and eugenics, it is even more important to understand how it was possible to *slip* from one to the other⁶. P.-A. Taguieff emphasises that what is common to both doctrines is the 'rejection of pity in politics', and the 'denunciation of any political system founded on compassion'⁷. In both cases, the indulgent society is described as unreasonable, counter-productive, even suicidal. 'Competition,

adaptation, selection', that could be the motto of eugenics as an *aggiornamento* of social Darwinism in the context of theories of heredity from the end of the 19th century.

To contemporaries, more numerous every day, who fear an unprecedented and catastrophic process of interaction between turbo-capitalism and biotechnologies, the history of 'biopolitical' ideas may bring ambivalent news: what they find vaguely frightening is not as totally new as they think. The definition of the danger of which they are so frightened and the clarification of possible means to remedy it can only gain from being confronted by this historical experience. It is incumbent upon us to think of the possible interactions between a 'metaphysics' of adaptation – in the name of a 'religion' of 'competition' as the only possible way of Progress – and the biological practices of selection.

In 1927 André Siegfried, the French political scientist, noticed the extent of the eugenic 'religion' in the United States. He wrote notably: 'The "yield" on the other side of the Ocean is such a prestigious notion that no objection would be able to contradict its demands: in its name, the most daring experiments are approved. Seen in this light, eugenics forms part of what is called, in the United States, the service⁸⁷. One could not describe better a context in which theories of heredity put themselves at the service of a logic of profitability. Those who were not able to adapt to an Order described as natural were considered to be social misfits beyond redemption. Distinctions between the criminal and the delinquent, then between the delinquent and the poor, tended to become blurred.

The frightened discourses created, rightly or wrongly, by the new eugenics evoke almost systematically the shadow of Nazism. Most certainly, Nazism did not escape the logic of profitability, but it ought first and foremost to be imprinted on our memories for its murderous dynamic of hatred. And yet the same weapons cannot be used to fight the logic of profitability and the discourse of hatred. The example of Nazi eugenics reminds us just how eugenics can take on a face whose monstrous character is immediately and obviously apparent. But it is at least as important to understand the insidious and progressive process by which eugenics can take its place in History as a commonplace and appropriate practice. It seems to me that the historical reflection on eugenics is more fertile upstream than downstream.

Let us guard against the temptation of anti-science populism which consists of denouncing a Doctor Mengele in every researcher, even and including when he seems to us to have scientist theories which worry us. In Germany these questions gave rise to what has ironically been called *Hysterikerstreit*⁸⁹ (hysterical argument). This stormy and confused controversy has revealed a sort of tragic divide between intellectuals and scientists. This is precisely what must be avoided. Spread of anxieties demands reflection from each and every one of us, and an undertaking to safeguard and reinforce the culture of debate. It is strong pluralism, not fear, which constitutes the best reply for the emergence of new biopolitical expertocracies.

As a coherent educator, Herbert Spencer also wrote: '[. . .] the first condition for success in this world is 'to be a good animal', and the first condition for national prosperity is that the nation should be composed of good animals. [. . .] The struggle for existence is so fierce in modern times that few men are capable of winning. Thousands of them have already succumbed to the extreme pressure they are under. If this pressure continues to increase, as is likely, it will prove to be a hard test for even the strongest constitutions. It is therefore becoming of utmost importance that children should be brought up in such a way that they are not just able to withstand the intellectual struggle which awaits them,

but also so that they can physically bear the extreme fatigue to which they will be subjected'. The mass practice of selection or pre-selection might one day now establish itself in the wake of ideologies of competition and adaptation, as it already has been established in several American states. I agree wholeheartedly with the mobilization of those who reject the idea that children should ever be biologically 'programmed'. But this principled position, too often expressed in vague panic, would be a little narrow if it accepted *de facto* a world in which the only possible future for children was to adapt to the dogma of competition and prevailing utilitarianism.

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Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

Notes

1. See *Diogenes* No.180, edited by Georges Guille-Escuret: *Le gène est-il l'avenir de l'homme? Pour un dialogue renoué (Is the gene man's future? Towards a renewed dialogue)*, Paris, Gallimard, October-December 1997.
2. Daniel Becquemont and Laurent Mucchielli, *Le cas Spencer (The Spencer affair)*, Paris, PUF 1998.
3. Very often, the expression 'social Darwinism' therefore seems as formidable as it is confused. It is most certainly problematical insofar as it has been coined in a polemical context. It is almost the same for that ideology as for the numerous pictorial movements which were christened by hostile critics. The fact remains that these enemies of 'social Darwinism' had a more accurate idea of it than our contemporaries. His harshest and most specific formulation was doubtless not penned by Spencer but by a French ideologue: Clémence Royer. It is equally clear that Spencer's prolix and complex work could not be condensed into a few propositions. But Spencer was still the first to develop a doctrine which did not consist solely of his work.
4. Célestin Bouglé, *La démocratie devant la Science. Études critiques sur l'hérédité, la concurrence et la différenciation (Democracy before Science. Critical studies on heredity, competition and differentiation)*, Paris, Félix Alcan 1909, p.230. The part of this book which deals with competition constitutes one of the most interesting attempts to reply to social Darwinism.
5. Herbert Spencer, *De l'éducation intellectuelle, morale et physique [On intellectual, moral and physical education]*, London 1861], Paris, Félix Alcan 1930, p.230.
6. On this slippage from a belief in the inevitable and spontaneous survival of the fittest to the imperative to fight against the proliferation of the unfit, see Daniel Becquemont, 'Les effets pervers de la protection sociale' ('The pernicious effects of social protection'), in Claude Blanckaert (ed), *Des sciences contre l'homme. Vol.II. Au nom du Bien (Sciences against man. Vol.II. In the name of the Good)*, Paris, Autrement 1993.
7. P.-A. Taguieff, *La Couleur et le Sang. Doctrines racistes à la française (Colour and Blood. French-style racist doctrines)*, Paris, Ed. Mille et une nuits 1998, pp.109–110.
8. André Siegfried, *Les États-Unis aujourd'hui (The United States today)*, [1st. ed.: 1927] Paris, Librairie Armand Colin 1947, p.110.
9. Lucas Delattre, 'Biologistes et philosophes, un débat tendu' ('Biologists and philosophers, a tense debate'), *Le Monde des Livres (The world of Books)*, 16 March 2001, p.XI.