

Chapter 4 Lesson 3

Social Darwinism and Social Reform

The Gilded Age

The period between 1870 and 1900 is known as the Gilded Age. During this period America made great advancements but some called attention to the issues below the gold. Crime, pollution, racial violence, corruption, poverty, income disparity and many other ills plagued America. The Gilded Age was a period of great cultural activity and new forms of the arts, entertainment and thinking arose.

Individualism

Many Americans believed that hard work, talents and commitment could take them to higher levels in American society. The idea of individualism was well expressed in the books of Horatio Alger. He wrote over 100 rags to riches novels. Although the true likelihood of this happening was slim, many believed.

Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer, a British philosopher, applied the concept of Charles Darwin's evolution and natural selection to society. Spencer argued that human society also evolves via competition and natural selection. Society is improved only when the "fittest" people survive. In the eyes of Spencer, society was improved only if the most intelligent and strongest survived. He believed the fittest societies to be those that were white, industrialized societies. Social reform was frowned upon because it would alter the natural processes. The poor were poor because they were not the fittest and should not be aided. Wealth was seen as a sign of success.

Darwinism and the Church

Most Christian denominations rejected the teachings of Charles Darwin, believing that evolution directly contradicted the Bible. There were a few ministers, however, that proposed that evolution could have been the method God chose to create the world.

Gospel of Wealth

Andrew Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth was a kinder gentler version of Social Darwinism. He believed that the wealthy should engage in philanthropy, to help others better themselves. According to the Gospel of Wealth, building schools, libraries and hospitals would help more than giving handouts to the poor.

The Rebirth of Reform

The Gilded Age led to a debate about how to best address our issues. While some turned to Social Darwinism others believed that it was time for the people and the government to play a more active role. Some argued that laissez-faire economics was growing the economy but that poverty had not decreased. To support this argument they looked at the income gap. The income gap between the

wealthy and the poor had grown, however, the poor had a higher standard of living than they had previously. The arguments against Social Darwinism were based on this argument.

- 1) Lester Frank Ward: *Dynamic Sociology*: argued that humans were different from animals in that they could plan to achieve certain outcomes. His ideas were called Reform Darwinism. People were successful because of their ability to cooperate and governments were more capable of solving the issues of society than marketplace (private) competition.
- 2) Edward Bellamy: *Looking Backward*: in this novel about who falls asleep in 1887 and wakes up in 2000. When he awakes there is a perfect society and the government owns all things and splits the wealth among the people equally. (ideas of socialism)
- 3) Naturalism: naturalists challenged the ideas of Social Darwinism by suggesting that some people failed in life due to circumstances beyond their control.