

# [Darwin’s design: social theory in origin of species](https://assignbuster.com/darwins-design-social-theory-in-origin-of-species/)

It is no secret that Darwin’s theory of Natural Selection and Evolution, put forth in Origin of Species, has been applied to social theory, giving rise to Social Darwinism. But are we correct to assume that Social Darwinism is simply an extract of evolutionary theory, the extrapolation of a dispassionate scientific treatise, or might the ideas in Origin of Species be influenced by a preexisting social theory? Darwin may actually have had an imperialist social agenda, that is, some incipient form of Social Darwinism, in mind when he wrote his famous book, as evidenced by his deliberate choice of ambiguous language that may allude to social relationships as well as natural ones. In numerous passages in Origin of Species, Darwin uses terminology that could refer to plants or animals in nature, but that could also refer to humans in society. Darwin believes that a goal of any species is to continue its existence; a species can do so only by evolving, by adapting in response to changes in the environment. Darwin’s evolutionary theory can be briefly summarized in five tenets: overpopulation, variation, competition or struggle for survival, survival of best adapted, and heredity. He contends that each species tends to overpopulate, or, in other words, to produce too many offspring to be supported by the resources in a given region. The result of overpopulation is that individuals must compete with other individuals of the same species, with individuals of other species, and with natural forces for food, shelter, mates, and so on. Each species also exhibits a variety of traits, so that, Darwin proposes, those individuals bearing traits best adapted to survival in their environment are most likely to survive and reproduce, thus passing on those favorable traits to their offspring. In this way, nature will select the best-adapted individuals and allow them to reproduce, so that, over time, an entire species will exhibit favorable or adaptable traits. Changes in the environment, such as climate change or the immigration of foreign species, will cause a given species to adapt, to evolve, over time to accommodate those changes. Darwin’s writing oscillates between passages describing overarching ideas and passages providing illuminating examples. It is in the former that Darwin occasionally uses language referring ambiguously to animals in nature or humans in society. Take for example, this passage: For in all countries, the natives have been so far conquered by naturalised productions, that they have allowed foreigners to take firm possession of the land. And as foreigners have thus everywhere beaten some of the natives, we may safely conclude that the natives might have been modified with advantage, so as to have better resisted such intruders. Darwin 132Is this a passage from a scientific treatise or a passage from a racist imperialist manifesto? Out of context, it is difficult to say conclusively. Darwin’s terms “ native,” “ foreigner,” and “ intruders” may refer to groups of plants or animals, but could just as easily refer to groups of people, even specific groups. The “ foreigners,” for instance, might be Europeans, or, even more specifically, the English. The natives, therefore, could be any number of groups conquered by the English, such as Indians or Africans. The suggestion that African natives “ allowed” the English to take possession of their land, or that the Africans could have been “ modified with advantage” so as to have resisted conquest by the better-adapted English would theoretically justify the colonization and exploitation of native peoples; like competing variations of grouse, pigeons, or plant life, imperialism would seem just another process of evolution. In other passages, as well, Darwin’s ambiguity is constructed so as to suggest specific peoples or historical events. For example, in the following passage, he describes the differentiation of species, or the success or failure of particular varieties (races) within one species: One large group will slowly conquer another large group, reduce its numbers, and thus lessen its chance of further variation and improvement. Within the same large group, the later and more highly perfected sub-groups, from branching out and seizing on many new places in the polity of Nature, will constantly tend to supplant and destroy the earlier and less improved sub-groups. Darwin 168Darwin is writing about competing groups within one species, and he could therefore be alluding to groups of people, that is, to societies in competition for survival. Could the “ one large group” refer to Europeans, who conquer other “ large groups,” such as Africans, as they colonize the globe? As in the passage cited above, the “ more highly perfected sub-group” succeeds by spreading out and occupying new territory; it succeeds, in other words, by colonization. The “ highly perfected” sub-group might be the English, and the less-improved sub-groups might be other European peoples who lack the funds or technology to seize “ new places in the polity of Nature” with such voracity. Later in the same paragraph, Darwin prognosticates: Looking to the future, we can predict that the groups of organic being which are now large and triumphant, and which are least broken up, that is, which as yet have suffered least extinction, will for a long period continue to increase. But which groups will ultimately prevail, no man can predict; for we well know that many groups, formerly most extensively developed, have now become extinct. 168-169Several specific societies suggest themselves as candidates for proxy in this passage. The society that is now “ large and triumphant” is, of course, either Europeans in general or the English in specific. In order to predict the future of this society, like countless historians before him, Darwin looks to the successes and failures of “ extensively developed” groups in the past, some of which became “ extinct” despite their developed status. Perhaps he is referring to the Roman Empire, which, at the time of its fall, covered more territory than any other empire in the history of the world, save one: The British Empire. Origin of Species contains many such passages that point to an imperialist agenda, advocating the evolutionary superiority of certain groups of humans, and promoting their conquest over less well-adapted, inferior groups. The ambiguity seems so deliberate, so calculated, that Darwin’s social theories must indeed predate his scientific treatise, and thus may have influenced his evolutionary theory. Would such a chronology challenge the validity of evolution or natural selection? Perhaps; but perhaps not, because it is only in the wording of specific passages, peppered throughout the text, that the agenda shines through. It may well be that Darwin arrived at his theories of evolution dispassionately, but saw ample opportunity to promote a coinciding social theory through terminology that is as evocative of social phenomena as it is of natural phenomena. He foresaw the extrapolation of his evolutionary principles into social theories that he already embraced, and thus facilitated that extrapolation through a clever choice of words.