

Social darwinism and the gospel of wealth

Sociology



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Essay 1: Social Darwinism and the Gospel of Wealth Social Darwinism was the use of Charles Darwin's scientific theory of evolution and natural selection to a society's development. The theory stated that in nature, only those who were the fittest survived. This explanation was adopted by many American businessmen who believed the theory to be scientific proof of their power. There were two men who stood out from the group of businessmen; Herbert Spencer and William Graham. Both of these men were extremely influential. Herbert Spencer was an English social philosopher and leading supporter of Darwin's theories. Among all of the other leaders in his era, Spencer did the most to gain acceptance for the theory of evolution. He applied the Darwinian Theory to human development. Spencer argued that material goods and power were signs of fitness and mankind benefited from the extreme competition and elimination of those that were weak and unfit. Spencer was broadly admired among American capitalist leaders. William Graham Sumner was a Yale based sociologist and political economist who promoted an extreme lenient position. Sumner argued that the government had no role in the economy's functions. Sumner argued against many issues such as, antitrust legislation, protective tariffs, and government interference on behalf of management in labor strike situations. Sumner believed that the economy was a natural event and that it needed no guidance in its evolutionary path. In 1907, Sumner published one of his most influential books, *Folkways*. In the book, he argues that customs and traditions were the most powerful influences on human behavior, even when they were illogical. At the end, he interprets that all forms of social reform were useless and misguided. Sumner's views contrasted roughly with the advocates of the Social Gospel. The Gospel of Wealth, sometimes known as the Gospel of

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Success, was the term for the idea promoted by several successful businessmen who believed that their immense wealth was a social benefit for everyone. The Gospel of Wealth was a softer and more pleasant version of Social Darwinism. The advocates associated wealth with responsibility, arguing that those with great material belongings had equally great obligations to society. Several individuals represent a range of viewpoints; for instance, Russell H. Conwell, Horatio Alger and Andrew Carnegie. Russell H. Conwell was a Baptist minister in Philadelphia. Conwell became an extremely wealthy man by delivering his stock lecture, *Acres of Diamonds*, to paying audiences. He stressed the idea that wealth was accessible to all people and that it was not necessary to travel far away in search of it. Conwell thought that God was responsible for directing wealth to those who could use it for beneficial reasons. Conwell was the founder of Temple University in Philadelphia and became one of the great public speakers of his time, delivering his speeches more than 6, 000 times. Horatio Alger was the son of a Unitarian minister and graduated with degrees from Harvard College and Harvard Divinity. When he was rejected for service in the Civil War he became a minister on Cape Cod. He turned to writing after losing his platform. In 1867, he published the first of more than one hundred short novels, all of which described the rags-to-riches tales meant to inspire the world's youth. Some of Alger's stories include, *Ragged Dick* and *Tattered Tom*. Alger's work was intended to convey the idea that great rewards awaited those who applied themselves and followed the rules. Later, Alger's writing became successful, selling more than one hundred million books. Andrew Carnegie was one of the great financial giants of his time. In 1889 he published an essay titled *The Gospel of Wealth*; in it he argued that the

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buildup of wealth was beneficial to society and the government should take no action to hinder it. Carnegie believed that the rich were trustees of their money and held it until proper public uses could be discovered. Unlike many others, Carnegie actually practiced what he preached and during his last years gave away a lot of his fortune. One of his most charitable projects was funding more than 2, 800 public libraries. Carnegie once wrote, " The man who dies rich dies disgraced. "