

The Scientific Source of Henry George's Evolutionary Theories

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IN *RENDEZVOUS WITH DESTINY*, Eric Goldman described the thought of Henry George as "reform Darwinism."¹ Neat as the expression is, it is objectionable for associating Darwinism and directed evolution. Darwin himself made no such connection, as his religious opponents saw. Asa Gray, it is true, felt that purpose might still be traced in the variations upon which Darwin built, although he knew that Darwin disagreed. Gray's continuing suggestions about adaptations and divine foresight eventually provoked Darwin's opposing statement in *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*.² Darwin never changed his mind on the point but died convinced that his arguments against Gray had not been satisfactorily answered.

¹ *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York, 1952), 97–100. Goldman's term has received gingerly acceptance from other historians who have commented on George's social theories. Perry Miller in *American Thought, Civil War to World War I* (New York, 1954), xxv, refers to George as "the pre-eminent spokesman for what has come to be called 'reforming Darwinism.'" Bert James Loewenberg in *Darwinism, Reaction or Reform?* (New York, 1957), 1–5, does refer to "reform Darwinists" but seems to prefer "liberal Darwinists," which he still regards as an unsatisfactory term. Charles Albro Barker in *Henry George* (New York, 1955), 427, writes that George "always qualified about social theory derived from Darwin, . . . did insert in *Social Problems* the thought—which Professor Eric Goldman calls Reform Darwinism—that biological and social evolution means eternal change." Sidney Fine did not employ the term in his *Laissez-Faire and the General Welfare State* (Ann Arbor, 1956); nor did Saul K. Padover in *The Genius of America: Men Whose Ideas Shaped Our Civilization* (New York, 1960). Richard Hofstadter excluded the term from the revised edition of his *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (Philadelphia, 1944; rev. ed., Boston, 1955), as did Daniel Aaron from the reissue of his *Men of Good Hope, A Story of American Progressives* (New York, 1951; rev. ed., 1961).

² *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (New York, 1868), II, 513–516.

“Reform Darwinism” thus combines elements which Darwin regarded as contradictory. Moreover the term obscures the evolutionary source from which George actually drew, since he rejected Darwinism as materialistic. George drew instead upon the Neo-Lamarckian theory of evolution, then widespread among American scientists, to challenge Darwinists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner.³

According to the Neo-Lamarckians, environmental relationships overshadowed natural selection in channeling evolutionary change. They maintained that an animal’s efforts in response to environment would localize a growth force within him, which would modify the organ wherein it was concentrated or even originate a new structure. Organs or characteristics so acquired would then become hereditary. Such traits, following the law of acceleration enunciated by Alpheus Hyatt and Edward Drinker Cope, would occur ever earlier in successive generations which could then make new advances. Yet the Neo-Lamarckians denied that improvement would continue indefinitely, because depletion of the vital forces would eventually bring increasingly degraded characteristics to the fore. Wildly aberrant forms would at length foretell extinction of the entire group. The Neo-Lamarckians thus offered a cyclical view by comparing stages of fossil histories to the youth, maturity, and old age of a single life.

These patterns fostered a new argument from design. Since evolution, according to the Neo-Lamarckians, might move rapidly and by abrupt step, they supported the contention that a divine mind was urging Nature along to a foreordained end. From this position it was easy to conclude that the human mind might similarly guide social evolution. So at least is how Henry George argued as he built Neo-Lamarckism into his “Law of Human Progress.”⁴ He thereby supplied a rationale for reform by making man responsible for his own social evolution.

Basic to George’s thought, as to Herbert Spencer’s, was the premise that civilization is indeed an evolution.⁵ Agreement between these

³ For further information about the Neo-Lamarckians, see William Coleman, “Science and Symbol in the Turner Frontier Hypothesis,” *American Historical Review*, LXXII (1966), 22–49; Philip O. Fothergill, *Historical Aspects of Organic Evolution* (London, 1952), 160–166; Edward J. Pfeifer, “The Genesis of American Neo-Lamarckism,” *Isis*, LVI (1965), 156–167.

⁴ *Progress and Poverty* (Modern Library ed.; New York, 1938) 475–552.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 478.

arch-enemies did not last, however, for George maintained that Spencer neither explained why civilizations progress nor provided any basis for optimism. His "hopeful fatalism" ignored the fact that the earth entombs empires as well as men. There is no law guaranteeing human progress, George declared.

For George the universal law corresponded to the Neo-Lamarckian theory of racial youth and senescence. "Every civilization that the world has yet seen has had its period of vigorous growth, of arrest and stagnation; its decline and fall."⁶ Though cyclical theories are commonplace, George gave strong hints as to the parentage of his. By combining his statement of the law with an attack upon natural selection, he argued as the Neo-Lamarckians did. His argument from archaeology corresponded to theirs from paleontology. Finally George's view that a dying civilization will manifest its condition echoed the Neo-Lamarckians. They saw racial extinction foretold in the evolution of contorted forms while George felt that the spread of religious superstitions was a similar portent in society. Cassandra-like he suggested that "possibly Mormonism and even grosser 'isms' " might give some idea of these.⁷ He thus supplied a social equivalent for the Neo-Lamarckian aberrant forms.

George's explanation of the social change underlying the cycle ties him additionally to the Hyatt-Cope school. Progress results, he held, from the traditions, customs, and beliefs which influence men.⁸ A modern schoolboy knows more astronomy than Ptolemy because of cultural transmission, not from inborn differences. Here George was simply applying the vexed doctrine of the heredity of acquired characteristics. In doing so, he was surprisingly modern, for he had espoused the only version of the teaching in good repute today. Ungratefully he gave only grudging assent to the belief that acquired physical traits can be passed from father to son.⁹

By maintaining, however, that differences among civilizations result from the conditions under which their citizens live, George had accepted an environmentalism which he soon expounded along Neo-Lamarckian lines. It was individual effort in response to the conditions of life that produced change which accumulated over the generations. Every human being, George said, felt "the desire to be,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 484.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 494.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 489.

to know, and to do.”¹⁰ These were the incentives to progress and led to the extension of knowledge, the betterment of methods, and the improvement of social conditions. But every civilization does not stimulate its citizens in equal degree. Consequently the members of one society might devote themselves largely to progressive activities, while the members of another might exert themselves less.

“Association in equality” was the ideal condition of progress, according to George.¹¹ Then more of a society’s collective “mental power,” which he defined as “the motor of progress,” would be freed for new advances.¹² On the other hand the civilization which wasted its “mental power” in war and internal strife demonstrated the cause of decline. Here again George had transposed a Neo-Lamarckian concept into a social setting, for Hyatt maintained that racial decline sprang from a weakening of vital forces. Cope had agreed that a growth force of fixed amount within an organism was the physical cause of organic change. Thus the ancestral giraffe by stretching for the fruit had localized the growth force within his neck. Though he thereby started the elongation of that member, he might likewise cause the atrophy of others which were consequently deprived. Similarly George’s “mental power” was fixed in quantity and governed by response of the social body to its environment, with progress or decline resulting.

Although these Neo-Lamarckian influences upon George have been overlooked, he did suggest the source of his ideas. In *A Perplexed Philosopher*, he commented that Spencer’s was only one system of evolution and one differing widely from that entertained by Alfred R. Wallace, Saint George Mivart, and Joseph Le Conte.¹³ Their views were not materialistic, George said. Of the authorities thus invoked the last two were definitely within the Neo-Lamarckian fold and the first had ironically supported the campaign against natural selection by questioning its efficacy in human evolution. Though George did not say that he shared the outlooks of these men, unquestionably he did. His orthogenetic conception of evolution, as designed by God to draw men together in unity, harmonized with Neo-Lamarckism.¹⁴ Not that George believed that God would

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 506–507.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 508.

¹² *Ibid.*, 507.

¹³ *A Perplexed Philosopher* (New York, 1892), 145–146.

¹⁴ *Social Problems* (New York, 1886), 261.

coerce men. They might either cooperate in the divine purpose or thwart it, precisely because they stood above the evolutionary process.

George was thus holding to a Christian view of human nature. His lasting belief was that man differed from the highest animals not only in degree but also in kind. But by making the soul man's truly distinguishing feature George encountered the problem which beset everyone desirous of reconciling Christianity and evolution. Where in the operations of Nature had the soul been infused? Refusing to exempt man from the evolutionary processes, though George felt scientifically justified in doing so, he thought it probable that God had implanted the soul into a body formed by evolution.¹⁵ Man would thus appear suddenly upon earth by rapid change of the sort which Neo-Lamarckism favored. According to this view George could indeed say that "the intelligence which increases all through nature's rising scale passes at one bound into an intelligence so superior, that the difference seems of kind rather than degree."¹⁶

Behind this conception of mankind one can readily see Wallace and Mivart, two of George's triumvirate of nonmaterialistic evolutionists. Wallace's suggestion that in human evolution a slight increase in brain power would ultimately be more important than any physical change is certainly in the background.¹⁷ Furthermore Wallace's doubts that natural selection could account for certain human features was particularly pleasing to those, like George, who felt that God must intervene somewhere in the evolutionary process. Of greater importance was Mivart whose *Genesis of Species* (1871) had popularized the idea, actually formed before 1859, that man's body might well be the product of Darwinian causes, but that his soul had come directly from God.

Joseph Le Conte was, however, most likely George's mentor in Neo-Lamarckism. Le Conte, a friend and fellow Californian, entertained all the biological concepts, from the belief in cycles to the orthogenetic conception of evolution, that George employed. Moreover, when writing *Progress and Poverty*, George saw Le Conte frequently, and Le Conte later passed approval upon the scientific material in *A Perplexed Philosopher*.¹⁸ Le Conte's "Critical Periods

¹⁵ *A Perplexed Philosopher*, 146–147.

¹⁶ *Social Problems*, 11.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Wallace's views on human evolution, see Loren Eiseley, *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It* (New York, 1958), 287–324.

¹⁸ Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George*, 580–581.

in the History of the Earth," delivered before the National Academy of Sciences in 1877, was a classical statement of Neo-Lamarckism from the geologist's point of view.¹⁹ Since George was working on *Progress and Poverty* at this very time, a comparison of the two works is an obvious step, which yields striking results.

Le Conte explained a "critical period" as a time when oscillation of the earth's crust accompanied rapid change in physical geography and climate. Such an upheaval would overcome the tendency toward stability, which all organisms possessed, and force evolutionary change by "a few decided steps." This doctrine, straight Neo-Lamarckism, had a terrifying quality which even Darwinism lacked. Since living forms would be involved on a vast scale in the critical periods, Le Conte was teaching something like the geological catastrophism of an earlier day. His description of the buildup of geological forces against the ultimately futile resistance of the earth's crust was also an ominous one, and significantly he saw the operation of similar forces in society. Likewise "in social evolution," he wrote, "there are periods in which forces of social change are gathering strength, but make no visible sign, being resisted by social conservatism—rigidity of the social crust—and periods in which resistance gives way and rapid changes occur."²⁰

Though George did not use Le Conte's term "critical period," the conviction that society was indeed on the brink of upheaval imparted the urgency to his writing. The whole gist of *Progress and Poverty* is that society must reform or else. And George's language in describing social conditions echoes Le Conte. For instance, George warned of the "volcanic forces" that will be generated as corruption spreads and of the unscrupulous men who will "dash aside forms that have lost their vitality."²¹ At times he implied that retrogression had already started, as in his statement that "the undercurrents of the times" seemed to be carrying civilization backward.²² He was even more pessimistic in *Social Problems* when he warned that "present tendencies are hurrying modern society toward catastrophe."²³ But if he really thought the hour too late he would hardly have struggled

¹⁹ "On Critical Periods in the History of the Earth and Their Relation to Evolution: and on the Quaternary as Such a Period," *American Journal of Science*, XIV (1877), 99–114.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

²¹ *Progress and Poverty*, 537.

²² *Ibid.*, 534.

²³ *Social Problems*, 320.

for reform. The conviction that certainly possessed George was that the civilized world was trembling before a "great movement," which must either be a "leap upward" toward new advances or a "plunge downward" toward barbarism.²⁴ He thus warned in effect that a "critical period" was at hand, which would move civilization to the next stage of the cycle.

Yet George seemingly absorbed more from Le Conte than particular concepts. George's application of Neo-Lamarckism shows that he had learned a method from his friend, who believed like Comte that the methods of the biologist could be used by the sociologist.²⁵ Since Le Conte listed archaeology as the sociological equivalent of paleontology, George's faith in cycles on the basis of human ruins seems tied conclusively to Neo-Lamarckism. But Le Conte held that biological laws did not apply fully to society, because man demonstrates a principle which sets him apart from other animals, as George of course agreed.²⁶ Furthermore when Le Conte compared the cells of living bodies to the members of a society, he was pointing out a correspondence just as George had done in equating mental power and growth force.²⁷

George nevertheless was not a mere shadow of Le Conte, for they also differed significantly in their ideas on social evolution. Le Conte was closer to the social Darwinists in fearing that natural selection might be curbed excessively in human affairs, while George had no such worry. But their relationship does show that George's evolutionary argument was not based upon Darwinism but upon the rival Neo-Lamarckian theory.²⁸

²⁴ *Progress and Poverty*, 543.

²⁵ Joseph Le Conte, "Scientific Relation of Sociology to Biology," *Popular Science Monthly*, XIV (1879), 325-336.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 430.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

²⁸ For a further discussion of Lamarckism in social thought, see George W. Stocking, Jr., "Lamarckianism in American Social Science: 1890-1915," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXIII (1962), 239-256.