

Re-thinking Social Darwinism

“ . . . I am unhappy that the pool of human germ plasm, which determines the nature of the human race, is deteriorating.”

— Linus Pauling, NOBEL LAUREATE, 1959 paper on radioactive fallout

Mr. Pauling was referring to current scientific data indicating that radiation from a nuclear war would damage human DNA and permanently impair the gene pool for future generations. Fortunately, the holocaust he feared has not come to pass, at least so far. But, he also implied that another threat to our germ plasm lay in the back-ground radiation from nuclear power plants and other artificial sources of ionizing radiation. Forty years later, though, we take nuclear power and bombs for granted. And, we have found other forms of terror to occupy our nightmares.

However, there is an even more insidious cause of deteriorating DNA, that passes without opposition—even with approbation. It masquerades in the guise of human kindness. Yet it could eventually lead to the extinction of the human species. I’m talking about Modern Medicine. Yes, the most ethical application of modern science, has the pride and arrogance—and the power—to defy the laws of Nature by thwarting the most basic rule of natural selection: *survival of the fittest*.

In the early decades of the 20th Century, the political theories of Social Darwinism evolved from the biological Theory of Evolution. This progressive humanistic philosophy proposed that we, the most advanced societies of the human race, should begin to improve on Nature’s creation. Eugenics and other social-cleansing techniques were devised to implement the theories. And, at first, these ideas were accepted as scientifically respectable and morally responsible.

But, after World War II, there was an overwhelmingly negative reaction to Social Darwinism. The theory’s association with Nazism, death camps, and Dr. Mengele “The Mangler” put an end to the concept of directed evolution—at least for the rest of the century. Any proposal that sounds remotely similar to Eugenics, such as Genetic Engineering, is automatically tarred with the brush of Hitler. “Improved” corn and rice are not much of a threat to human germ plasm. Yet, each advance in DNA technology is opposed by placard wavers.

Unfortunately, another form of scary artificial evolution continues to this day, right under our sniffing noses. To wit: the miracles of modern medicine allow the weak and unfit to survive and reproduce. Consequently, it would seem that our collective human genome—just as much as the air and water—is being polluted by technology. In recent years, scientists and environmentalists have been working hard to mitigate the unfortunate side-effects of our material progress. And yet, due to the Frankenstein associations of Eugenics, no one in his right mind would suggest that we try to clean-up the gene pool.

From Rachel Carson to the Club of Rome, the Jeremiahs of environmental Armageddon have raised the consciousness of the civilized world toward our own follies. But, has any genetic prophet-of-doom pointed-out the fallacy of fooling Mother Nature with benevolent medical magic? Has any

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tenured evolutionary economist projected current statistics into the future to foresee what harm we are doing to our own offspring?

If not, perhaps it’s time for a voice crying in the wilderness to prophesy our impending genetic suicide. Or maybe to assure us that we have nothing to worry about, because Nature will forgive us our sins of good intent. Considering the passionate public sentiment in favor of medical providence and against genetic meddling, is there anything we can do to avoid breeding a race of evolutionary freaks?

Is there any way we can put a human face on Social Darwinism? What’s to keep us from going even farther by reviving some ancient eugenic cultural practices, such as baby exposing and elder abandonment? Don’t look at me, I don’t have the answer! But here’s a topic for your next coffee break: Can we have antibiotics, artificial hearts, prenatal intervention, and a viable gene-pool too? Now, discuss among yourselves.

John Earwood 03/22/02
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