

Distancing Darwin from Racism Is a Fool's Errand

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A recent article by Livia Gershon examines so-called “[Bizarre Theories of the American School of Evolution](https://daily.jstor.org/the-bizarre-theories-of-the-american-school-of-evolution/) (<https://daily.jstor.org/the-bizarre-theories-of-the-american-school-of-evolution/>).” She tries to implicitly distance Darwin from racism by suggesting that his outspoken critic, famed paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope (1840-1897), opposed women’s suffrage and equality for African Americans as “two perils of the Indo-European.” These racist and misogynistic views, insists Gershon, were shared by the “American School” of evolutionary anthropology, a group that had morphed from the polygenism of a previous generation led by men like Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), and Josiah Clark Nott (1804-1873) into a new brand of neo-Lamarckian theory. According to the article, “They [Cope and his colleagues] rejected Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Instead, they built on the work of French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829). Unlike Darwin, Lamarck believed that acquired characteristics like strong muscles could be passed on to descendants.” Gershon continues, “In humans, Lamarck argued, sentiment — emotional responses to physical sensations — gradually made physical changes in the body.”

It is this “sentimental” view that allegedly permitted the kind of racial and gender-biased calculus to permeate the thinking of the “American School” in contrast supposedly to Darwin, whose “random, amoral process” of blind evolution simply allowed the chips to fall where they might

without such judgmental prejudices. Actually, Gershon is merely highlighting an article by Rutgers University Women's and Gender Studies professor Kyla Schuller, "[Taxonomies of Feeling: The Epistemology of Sentimentalism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Racial and Sexual Science](https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/45690/)" (<https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/45690/>), written in a dense, anfractuious academese. It is best not to wander too deeply into Schuller's intellectual weeds except to say that it only adds tortuous detail to the summary errors of Gershon's briefer piece. So in the interest of keeping this simple, let's just say that the most "bizarre" aspect of this is not neo-Lamarckism, but rather the strange bifurcated equation that neo-Lamarckism = racial and gender bias while Darwinism = objective "science" shorn of all prejudicial baggage. This is demonstrably wrong historically and scientifically.

Darwin's Bulldog Was No Better

Historically, Darwin and his cohorts were just as racist and gender biased as Cope or anyone else of their era. As I have pointed out, Darwin was certainly as racist as the notorious species fixist Louis Agassiz (<https://evolutionnews.org/2020/05/louis-agassiz-some-additional-thoughts/>). And Darwin's Bulldog, Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), was no better, arguing shortly after the American Civil War that blacks were doomed now that they were cut free from the purported protective influences of their owners. Huxley stated boldly that "no rational man, cognizant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the average white man." In fact, one man did, the Darwinists' arch enemy Richard Owen (1804-1892). A fascinating examination of this important point is presented in Christopher E. Cosans' *Owen's Ape & Darwin's Bulldog* (<https://www.amazon.com/Owens-Ape-Darwins-Bulldog-Creationism/dp/0253220513>).

As for women, Darwin was no champion of gender equality. As he stated in the *Descent of Man* (http://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/Freeman_TheDescentofMan.html), "Man is more courageous, pugnacious, and energetic than woman, and has a more inventive genius." With their male counterparts having a brain that is "absolutely larger," Darwin doubted that women could possibly surmount their biological limitations. Nevertheless, social class could create, for Darwin, a state of general improvement for women. But according to Darwin it was *male selection* mediated by social class that made the difference. Again in the *Descent* he writes,

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It appears to me with justice, that the members of our aristocracy, including under this term all wealthy families in which primogeniture has long prevailed, from having chosen during many generations from all classes the more beautiful women as their wives, have become handsomer, according to the European standard of beauty, than the middle classes; yet the middle classes are placed under equally favourable conditions of life for the perfect development of the body.

There is, of course, no mention of this by the gender studies expert Schuller.

“A Millennial Ascent into Perfection”

Gershon and Schuller seem to imply that part of Cope's problem was that "Many Anglo-Saxons looked forward not just to ongoing biosocial evolution but also to a millennial ascent into perfection." Perhaps, but so did Darwin! Writing to the Rev. Charles Kingsley (1819-1879) on February 6, 1862, he stated, "It is very true what you say about the higher races of men, when high enough, replacing & clearing off the lower races. In 500 years how the Anglo-Saxon race will have spread & exterminated whole nations; & in consequence how much the human race, viewed as a unit, will have risen in rank." He voiced the same sentiment years later in a letter to Irish philosopher and political economist William Graham (1839-1911) on July 3, 1881, "Remember what risks the nations of Europe ran, not so many centuries ago of being overwhelmed by the Turks, and how ridiculous such an idea now is. The more civilised so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world."

For Darwin, racial superiority was "survival of the fittest" put into terms of national expansion and even of human progress. Moreover, that progress was defined in explicitly racial terms. Darwin believed this was confirmed in the "science" of craniotomy, the idea that races could be ranked by measuring the cranial capacities of their respective skulls. If Cope could be a racist by "sentiment," Darwin could confirm his racism in the cold, hard "facts" of his racialized science.

Darwin the Neo-Lamarckian

It is inaccurate to divide 19th-century evolutionary racial theory on the basis of a Lamarckian litmus test in any case. The reason is that although Cope was a neo-Lamarckian, so was Darwin. Neither Gershon nor Schuller mentions Darwin's pangenesis theory of inheritance, which was Lamarckian. As evolutionary historian Peter Bowler has point out in *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (<https://www.amazon.com/Evolution-History-Idea-Anniversary-Preface/dp/0520261283>), "Darwin's lifelong commitment to a limited amount of Lamarckism and to what was later called blending inheritance (the mixture of parental characters) were integral parts of his worldview." Biologist Rupert Sheldrake in *Science Set Free* (<https://www.amazon.com/Science-Set-Free-Paths-Discovery/dp/0770436722>) agrees:

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In Darwin's day, most people assumed that acquired characteristics could indeed be inherited. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had taken this for granted in his theory of evolution published more than fifty years before Darwin's, and the inheritance of acquired characteristics was often referred to as "Lamarckian inheritance." Darwin shared this belief and cited many examples to support it. In this respect Darwin was a Lamarckian, not so much because of Lamarck's influence but because he and Lamarck both accepted the inheritance of acquired characteristics as a matter of common sense.

Such a historical context makes Lamarckian distinctions — racial or otherwise — meaningless.

Simply Scientifically Wrong

Of course Lamarckism need not be expressed as benighted racial and gender prejudice. Gershon's characterization of Lamarckian evolution as "bizarre" is simply scientifically wrong. For example, geneticist [Eva Jablonka](https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/eva-jablonka) (<https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/eva-jablonka>) is presently arguing for a more Lamarckian approach, as is bioengineer [Raju Pookottil](https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/raju-pookottil) (<https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/raju-pookottil>), cell biologist [Mariusz Nowacki](https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/mariusz-nowacki) (<https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/mariusz-nowacki>), and biophysicist [Yoav Soen](https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/yoav-soen) (<https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/people/view/yoav-soen>). Again, Rupert Sheldrake sheds some light:

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The taboo against the inheritance of acquired characteristics began to dissolve around the turn of the millennium. There is a growing recognition that some acquired characteristics can indeed be inherited. This kind of inheritance is now called "epigenetic inheritance." In this context, the word "epigenetic" signifies "over and above genetics." Some kinds of epigenetic inheritance depend on chemical attachments to genes, particularly of methyl groups. Genes can be "switched off" by the methylation of the DNA itself or of the proteins that bind to it.

Schuller's blinkered views are only magnified by Gershon's repeating them. It is astonishing that such stunning ignorance of history and science can be displayed in an academic publication, only to be repeated by way of summation. But this is what happens when an article — peer-reviewed or not — says the "right" things. Clearly, historical and scientific accuracy takes a back seat to providing cover for Darwin's own views on race and gender. Details and facts are easily swept under the rug when sanitizing Darwin. But finger-pointing at "bizarre theories" and one-sided race-baiting are thin disguises for a worldview that lives in a glass house.

What Schuller and Gershon are trying to protect Darwinism from are the social applications to which it has been so prone. Indeed, Darwin was as much committed to a racialized and misogynistic ethos as any of his generation. What Adrian Desmond and James Moore wrote nearly thirty years ago in *Darwin* (<https://www.amazon.com/Darwin-Tormented-Evolutionist-Adrian-Desmond/dp/0393311503>) remains as true as ever:

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Did he [Darwin] see society, like nature, progress by culling its unfit members? "Social Darwinism" is often taken to be something extraneous, an ugly concretion added to the pure Darwinian corpus after the event, tarnishing Darwin's image. But his notebooks make plain that competition, free trade, imperialism, racial extermination, and sexual inequality were written into the equation from the start — "Darwinism" was always intended to explain human society.

Historian of science and social anthropologist Henrika Kuklik (1942-2013) was even more emphatic, stating that "scholars have wasted their time trying to exonerate Darwin of

responsibility for Social Darwinism, for he was a Social Darwinist.”

What a shame that Schuller sent Gershon on such a fool's errand. Both returned empty-handed and ended up looking either deceitful or ignorant. I'll assume the latter; it seems the more charitable conclusion.

Editor's note: For more on Darwinism's enduring legacy of racism, watch the award-winning documentary *Human Zoos*:

Human Zoos: America's Forgotten History of Scientific Racism

