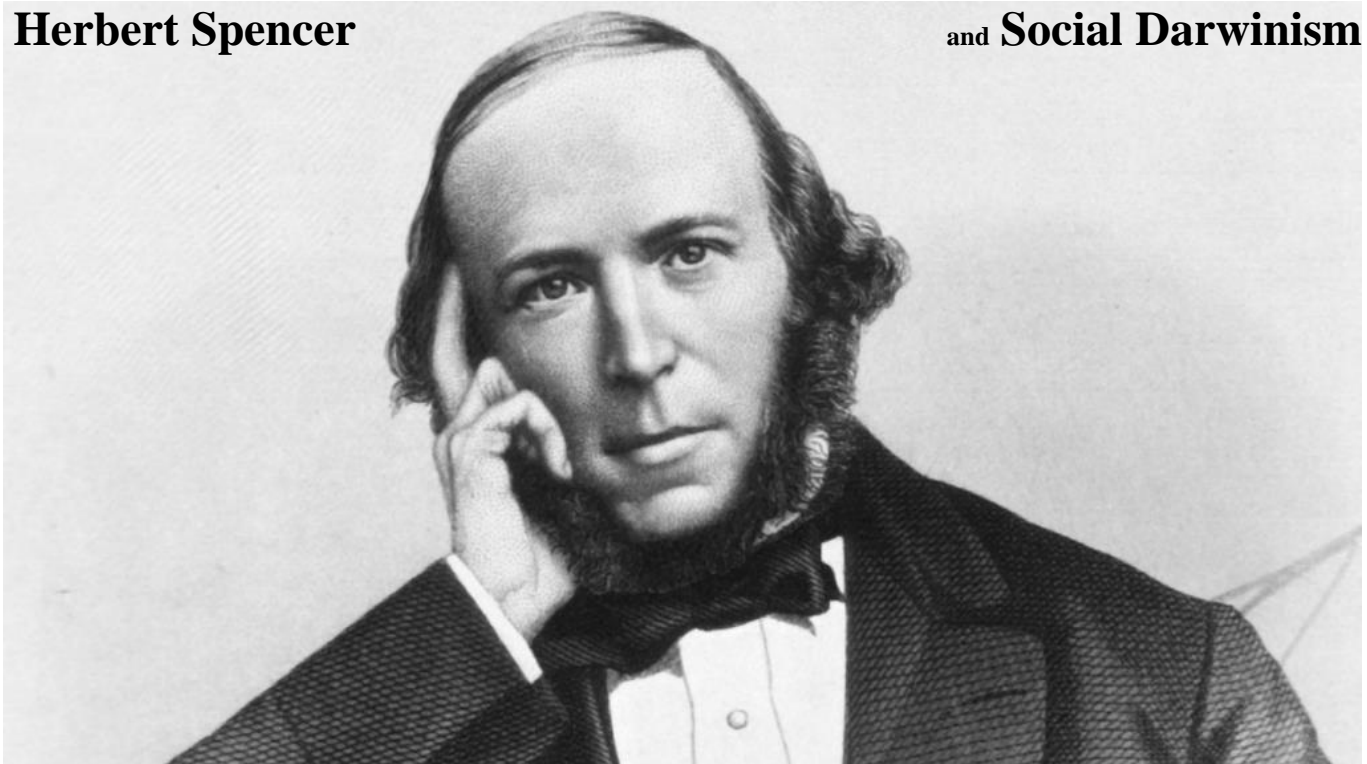


Herbert Spencer

and Social Darwinism



Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who grew up in England, thought that societies evolve from lower (“barbarian”) to higher (“civilized”) forms. As generations pass, the most capable and intelligent (“the fittest”) members of a society survive, while the less capable die out. Thus, over time, societies improve. If you help the lower classes, you interfere with this natural process. The fittest members will produce a more advanced society—unless misguided do-gooders get in the way and help the less fit survive.

Spencer called this principle “the survival of the fittest.” Although Spencer coined this phrase, it usually is attributed to his contemporary, Charles Darwin, who proposed that organisms evolve overtime as they adapt to their environment. Because they are similar to Darwin’s ideas, Spencer’s views of the evolution of societies became known as *social Darwinism*.

Spencer’s ideas that charity and helping the poor were wrong offended many, but the wealthy industrialists of the time liked these ideas. J.D. Rockefeller and other industrialists saw themselves as “the fittest”—and therefore superior. Not coincidentally, Spencer’s views helped them avoid feelings of guilt for living like royalty while people around them went hungry.

Spencer did not conduct scientific studies. He simply developed ideas about society. Spencer gained a wide following in England and the United States, where he was sought after as a speaker, but eventually social Darwinism was discredited.

1. Which statement best reflects Herbert Spencer’s views on charity?
 - a. The poor are the unfortunate victims of capitalism and should be helped by the government.
 - b. The poor will eventually unite in revolution and throw off their chains of bondage.
 - c. The poor are the weakest members of society, and if society intervenes to help them, it is interrupting the natural process of social evolution
2. Do you think there are individuals that believe in social Darwinism today?