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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory, by Robert J. Richards

16 January 2014

Nazi ideology may not have adopted evolutionary theory wholesale, but it certainly used its ideas, says Yvonne Sherratt

Across nine scholarly and wide-ranging essays, centred on the influence and impact of Charles Darwin and Darwinism on Western thought, Robert Richards begins with an assessment of the moral implications of the theory, and goes on to consider its relationship with Romanticism and the work of Darwinian disciples such as Ernst Haeckel, who developed a form of social Darwinism in pre-Nazi Germany.

Darwin was, according to Richards, deserving in every sense of his mammoth reputation. But it is worth noting that Darwin was not a philosopher, a moralist or indeed a social or cultural historian. And in spite of Richards' attempts throughout his essays to demonstrate the worth of Darwin's thought in these areas, there are, to my mind, far richer, more profound, subtle and perceptive thinkers in the Western canon who can offer more insight into the human social condition. It is, in part, the attempt to use Darwinism in these humanities arenas that leads to forms of reductionism. But reductionism isn't the worst that Darwin has been accused of.

While Hitler did not borrow a coherent version of evolutionary theory, that does not mean he did not appropriate Darwinian ideas

Richards' book takes its title from the final essay, "Was Hitler a Darwinian?". Herein the acclaimed historian of science defends Darwin and most (or indeed, all) serious branches of Darwinism, including social Darwinism, from any involvement with Nazi ideology. Nazi ideology, of course, was famously preoccupied with "racial hierarchy", ideas of "racial purity" and "selective breeding". There were also many references to survival of the fittest, and to war and violence as a means of separating the weak from the strong. Haeckel, a biologist and a disciple of Darwin, went beyond Darwin's sociological ambitions in *The Descent of Man* and advocated that humanity should be governed by the laws of biology. Haeckel was impressed by the Spartans who, he believed, left their sick and disabled children to die on the city state's outskirts to keep the population strong and healthy.

Could modern versions of such atrocious ideas really be traced back to Darwinism? That is Richards' central question and his answer is a resounding "no". His method of procuring this answer is to set a reasonably high and coherent standard for classifying any individual or thinker as Darwinian. He then depicts in meticulous detail how Hitler fails to attain this standard and is therefore not a Darwinian.

The problem with this approach is that Hitler was not an intellectual or a scholar: he was a hack and one who absorbed and usurped many influential ideas. If one developed a coherent standard for all the thinkers who are suspected of informing Hitler, Hitler would fail to attain the requisite standard with any one of them and therefore we would be left with the conclusion that absolutely no one had any impact on the Nazi leader. This would also include those who Richards alleges *did* inspire Hitler, such as Hegel and various Christian and German thinkers.

That Hitler, and all Nazi ideologists, failed to live up to any scholarly standards does not mean that Nazism was not influenced by, or did not usurp crude notions from, all kinds of high minds. While Richards may be correct in pointing out that Hitler did not borrow a coherent version of evolutionary theory, that does not mean that he and his Nazi henchmen did not appropriate Darwinian-style ideas, such as the survival of the fittest and selective breeding. The idea of a superior race bred through history is surely indebted to strands of social Darwinism as much as to any of the other ideologies that Hitler usurped.

Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory

By Robert J. Richards

University of Chicago Press, 280pp, £57.50 and £19.50

ISBN 9780226058764, 58931 and 59099 (e-book)

Published 9 December 2013



(URL=<http://www.tslshop.co.uk/thed-tsl/THEDO76>

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Reviewer:

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