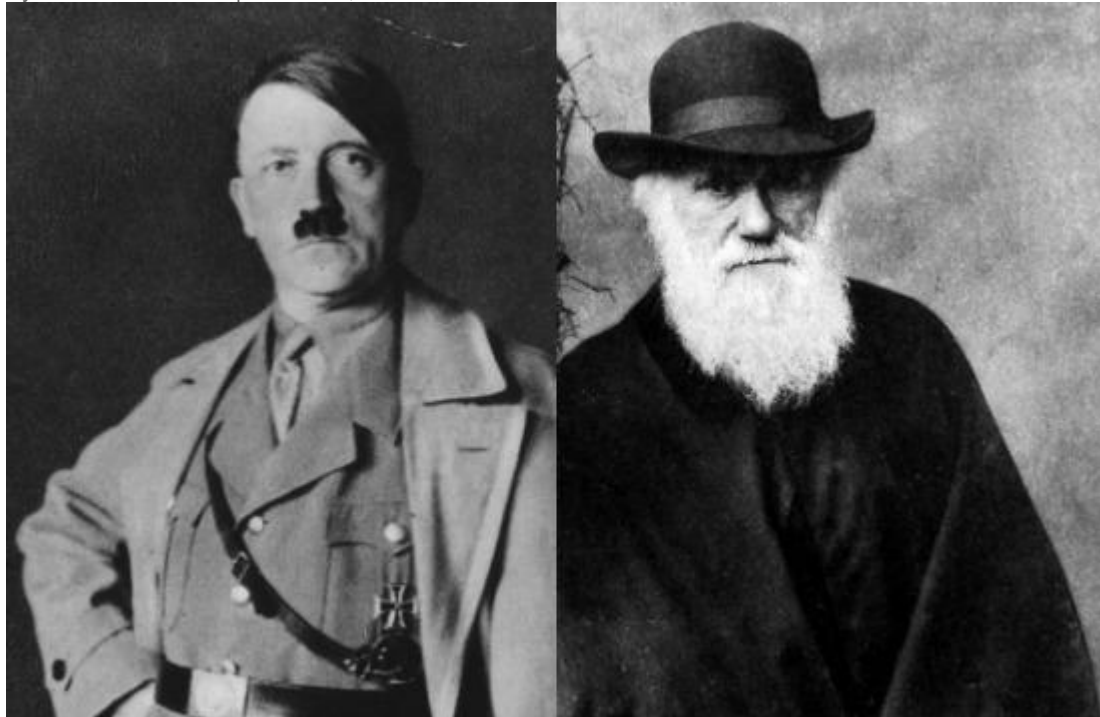


I. Darwin, Hitler, and the Hijacking of Evolutionary Theory

By Michael Schulson | March 11, 2014



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

By Robert J. Richards

The University of Chicago Press, 2013

Biology is not ideology. But with evolution, it's easy to get confused. With his theory of evolution by natural selection, Charles Darwin took some simple observations and turned them into a story of world history, broadly wrought. In doing so, he placed his theory in the company of other grand narratives—among them the origin stories of the Hebrew Bible, the dialectics of Marxism, and the grand, delusional myths of totalitarian states.

Over the years, Darwin's supporters and detractors have often entangled his theory with these sweeping narratives. Even in the early days of *On the Origin of Species*, evolution came under attack from the biblically-minded. **Anti-Marxists** and Marxists alike—including Karl himself—have tried to link the English scientist with communism. And, especially in recent years, a number of **creationist writers have tried** to draw a **direct line** from Darwin to Dachau.

A story of intraspecies competition and brutal, let-the-winner-take-all history: Nazism does sound a bit Darwinian, doesn't it? Writers like Richard Weikart, a professor of history at California State University, Stanislaus, and a fellow at the Discovery Institute, an intelligent design think-tank, have tried to turn that resemblance into a causal

connection. In books such as *From Darwin to Hitler* and *Hitler's Ethic*, Weikart argues that evolutionary theory motivated Hitler's actions, providing him the justification he needed to develop a twisted kind of ethics.

From the gun control **debate** to the **backlash** against Paul Ryan's speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention to Hillary Clinton's **response** to Putin's actions in Ukraine, invoking Hitler can dramatize almost any issue. And for the Discovery Institute, which has as its broader goal "to defeat scientific materialism and its destructive moral, cultural, and political legacies," the connection between Darwin and Hitler is part of a much larger claim: that Darwinism supports materialism, and that materialism erodes the Christian tradition and supports all sorts of social evils, with Hitler as the quintessential case.

Meanwhile, for those seeking to construct an ethics without a god, or to uphold a materialist worldview—no transcendent powers necessary—Darwin is an obvious ally. It's unsurprising that today's most prominent atheist, Richard Dawkins, should also be an evolutionary biologist. After all, few besides Darwin have reasoned so well, and so broadly, about life solely on the basis of material evidence.

Amidst these ideological adoptions and co-optations, it can be easy to forget that Darwinian evolution is a particular idea, developed in a particular time by a particular person. In *Was Hitler a Darwinian?*, Robert J. Richards, a historian of science at the University of Chicago, removes Darwin from the culture wars and sets him firmly back in the nineteenth century. His essays will be disappointing to those who wish to use Darwin as an ideological symbol. For everyone else, though, Richards has provided an illuminating look at what makes Darwinian theory so slippery, and so magnetic, even to those of us outside the sciences.

Over the course of eight meticulous essays, Richards looks at how Darwin integrated moral concerns, theological ideas, and Romantic themes into his thinking; considers his influence on two prominent German thinkers, Ernst Haeckel and August Schleicher; and, in the book's longest section, deconstructs Darwin's ostensible influence on National Socialism. Two essential concerns seem to undergird all these essays: what is Darwinian theory in its original form? And what ideological commitments do, or do not, emerge from that original Darwinism?

Here's the story, as Richards tells it: a recent university graduate, schooled in theology, goes on a long journey to South America. The young Darwin brings along some volumes from one of his favorite authors, Alexander von Humboldt, a German Romantic, a friend of Goethe, and a famous traveler who inspired Darwin to head to the New World. Humboldt, Richards writes, "represented nature in the Americas not as a stuttering, passionless machine that ground out products ... but as a cosmos of interacting organisms ... expressing aesthetic and moral values." Exploring the Americas and taking extensive notes, the young Darwin echoes Humboldt's sense of the creative force in nature.

During the two decades after his return to Britain, Darwin gradually develops a rigorous way of conceptualizing that creative force. In keeping with the Romantic flavor of his youth, he often describes natural selection as a thinking being made manifest in nature. Much of this language, perhaps, is just metaphorical, and Richards' insistence that the "evocative surface" of these metaphors "encased a deep conceptual grammar that structured [Darwin's] thinking about nature" is frustratingly vague. Still, there's no doubt that the language of Darwin's work does seem to gravitate toward a view of nature as benevolent and progressive. "As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection," Darwin writes in the *Origin*.

Darwin does not exclude the divine from this schema. Shortly after the publication of the *Origin*, Darwin writes to his friend Asa Gray that, "I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws ...". In the manuscript of the *Origin*, Richards writes, "Darwin simply defined nature as 'the laws ordained by God to govern the Universe.'" In his later years, Darwin would doubt the divine's role in his theory (he died a professed agnostic). But Richards makes a persuasive case that "when [Darwin] worked out his theory from 1837 to 1859, he was a theist who believed that the laws of nature, including natural selection, were designed by the creator."

Should we care? Evolutionary biology has moved far beyond Darwin's work, and his beliefs about nature don't change how nature actually works. Still, as Richards points out, "Darwin's theory has an existence comparable to that of a species." And "theories also evolve, though neither the words on a page nor even the individual ideas in the mind

of the theorist evolve.” We should pay attention to the theory as it is today, in its presently evolved form. But as any paleontologist could tell you—as Darwin himself knew well—to understand the essence of a thing, you sometimes must look into the past.

Richards’ work might not dictate how “the flexible of mind” should see nature. But his close reading of Darwin’s moral, theological, and Romantic influences should give us pause before we declare that faith or ethics are wholly incommensurate with evolutionary theory. After all, they were right there at its origin.

This view of Darwin-the-benevolent-Romantic might also make one wonder how Darwinian a Nazi, or a social Darwinist, could actually be. This, more or less, is Richards’ first point about the Hitler-Darwin connection: that even if Hitler were a science-worshipping-atheist-materialist who selected a different volume of Darwin’s work each morning to read over his breakfast, he’d probably be displeased with certain allusions to positive, creative, seemingly animate forces.

But that point may be moot, because, as Richards convincingly argues, Hitler was *not* a raving materialist who enjoyed reading Darwin. The connection is mostly bunk.

Richards lays out his case methodically: Hitler only referred explicitly to Darwinian evolution twice. In one of those instances the reference was mostly incidental. In the other, Richards writes, “[T]he German leader was recorded as positively rejecting any notion of the descent of human beings from lower animals.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler mentions neither Darwin nor Ernst Haeckel, who popularized the theory of evolution in Germany. Historians trying to link Darwin and Hitler have sometimes translated the word *Entwicklung*, which appears often in *Mein Kampf*, as “evolution.” That’s a misleading translation, Richard argues. The word generally means “development,” and it was seldom applied to Darwin’s theory after the late nineteenth century.

Yes, Darwin had some notion of a race hierarchy, and some notion of competition between species and change of species over time. But racial hierarchies were commonplace among nineteenth-century thinkers, and the idea of animals and humans changing over time predates Darwin (it’s evolution *by natural selection* that Darwin pioneered; not the idea that species can change). Nor is it clear why eugenics—which Darwin did not develop, and which essentially constitutes the practice of animal breeding applied to human beings—should automatically be taken as Darwinian. The chief scientific (or pseudoscientific) influence on Hitler’s racial politics was Houston Stewart Chamberlain. As Richards documents, Chamberlain was an avowed anti-Darwinian. Finally, it’s not clear how Hitler’s delusions—his “gauzy mystical attitude about *Deutschtum* and the German race,” in Richards’ fine phrasing—could be construed as strictly materialistic.

A more interesting question, perhaps, is why *wasn’t* Hitler a Darwinian? It’s certainly easy to see how evolution by natural selection could be picked up by someone with the goal of world domination. Richards doesn’t broach this question, but he suggests some initial answers. In particular, he points out that Nazism depended on a narrative of restoration. Something ancient had been suppressed in the race, and it needed to be brought back to glory. Hitler’s was a story of purity regained—not a story of transformation into something new. The Nazis were more interested in finding the lost Aryan sanctuaries on the Tibetan Plateau (and in fact sent an expedition to do so) than in tracing their descent from apes.

The core ideas of Darwinism, in other words, don’t jibe with the central pillars of Nazism. And if there is any distinctive core to Darwinian evolution that goes beyond the biological details—that could, perhaps, be absorbed into ideologies and picked up by ethicists—it is not simply that struggle is central to existence. That idea is neither uniquely Darwinian nor, in light of the prevalence of altruism in the natural world, of which Darwin was well aware, especially comprehensive. Nor is the core of Darwinian theory the idea that randomness is paramount. After all, part of Darwin’s genius was to illuminate a way by which order can emerge from chance.

What persists to the present day, with implications beyond biology, is Darwin’s radical insistence that something so incremental, so simple, and so observable as natural selection can explain so much—that it can be extrapolated to such extremes without losing its explanatory punch. That’s not a religious message—though the religious may grapple with it, or even take joy in it. Nor is it a strictly materialist message—although it may certainly lend support to a materialist view of the world. Nor is it a political idea—though it may be co-opted by political movements. Instead,

unlike those histories in which the largest powers explain the smallest details, it's a theory of how the smallest forces can give rise to the grand panoply of life. And that's an idea that, while not religious, or necessarily materialist, or political, is certainly beautiful.

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