

Hitlerian evolution

Your reviewer of my book *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory* (Books, 16 January), might well secure an appointment with her optometrist.

She claims that Richards “defends Darwin and most (or indeed, all) serious branches of Darwinism, including social Darwinism, from any involvement with Nazi ideology”. In my book, I cite several Darwinians who were either official members of the Nazi Party (eg, Konrad Lorenz) or wished to be (eg, Ernst Lehmann). My concern was to show that there was no evidence that Hitler himself suffered any identifiable influence from Darwin’s theory of evolution. My analysis was in response to the general assumption, including that of the reviewer, that Darwinian theory had a measured impact on Hitler’s racial ideas – indeed, some arguing that such connection somehow invalidated Darwinian theory. The clearest evidence against the assumption of a Darwinian connection is Hitler’s belief that all animal species remained fixed; they did not alter over time. Moreover, he explicitly rejected the idea that human beings descended from ape-like ancestors. Surely a minimal criterion for regarding someone a Darwinian would be acceptance of transmutation of species.

Yet your reviewer thinks my standards are too high for regarding a hack like Hitler as a Darwinian. I do try to show some of the

non-Darwinian sources whence Hitler derived his ideas about racial struggle – individuals whom he actually mentioned, cited, and whose ideas were similar. The reviewer pleads that certainly Hitler was “indebted to strands of social Darwinism”. I specifically indicate that under the usual acceptance of the term, Hitler was indeed a social Darwinian.

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