

**Robert J. Richards.** *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory.* 269 pp., illus., bibl., index. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2013. \$27.50 (paper).

The thread of ideas connecting Darwin and Hitler has long been a topic of historical speculation. During World War II, it was argued by Julian Huxley that Nazism represented a debased form of pseudo-science. But the trend in history of science has been increasingly to see Nazism as allowing biology to flourish on topics like hormones, viruses, and enzymes and as promoting variants of a synthesis between Darwinism and Mendelism. Certainly, Jewish and dissident scientists were persecuted, and some were killed in concentration camps, but German life science flourished in terms of funding and research throughout the Third Reich. Historical interest in the sources of Nazi notions of race and evolution has meant that ideas of a link between Darwin and Hitler mediated through Social Darwinism have resurfaced. Indeed, might linking Darwin to Hitler reveal racist and inhumane ethics immanent in Darwinian evolution? Robert Richards has responded in the form of this intellectually engaging set of forthright essays on disputed questions. The book is not only a set of essays on a series of discrete questions, but also a coherent endeavor to tease apart assumed linkages between Darwinian evolution and Hitler's ideas of a struggle for racial purity. Questions arise, however: How cohesive are the essays? Is Richards's valiant effort to dissociate Darwin from Hitler successful?

The first essays are a vigorously and closely argued analysis of Darwin's concept of natural selection with an eye to moral purpose and divergence. We start among a rather introverted coterie of Darwin scholars: these mostly convivial disagreements (though Richards's patience is sorely tried by tendentious condemnation of Darwin's errors) provide insight into the humane and modestly self-deprecating Darwin. Richards establishes a resoundingly moral view of Darwin—the issues of intelligence, ethics, and human morality are highlighted in the chapter on mind, morals, and the emotions. Darwin becomes

a philosopher of altruism—a sharp contrast to what Social Darwinism is often assumed to be. Richards comes close to presenting an image of Darwin retaining ideas of intelligent design—so establishing Darwin as a spiritual figure who in many respects was the antithesis of Hitler.

One theme of *Was Hitler a Darwinian?* is the reciprocity between German and British evolutionary ideas. Richards conjectures that the philologist August Schleicher influenced Darwin's ideas on the naturalistic origins of language, and indeed human origins, with language modifying the brain. But when it comes to Herbert Spencer, we have a very partial appraisal through the lens of functional adaptation. This is a very restricted reading—and one that does not grasp the scientific importance of Spencer in his time as regards the biology of the nervous system and the concept of organic integration. Spencer's innovative use of epigenesis in the influential essay "Progress—Its Law and Cause" needs to be figured in as the wellspring of his organicism. Richards clings to the conventional stereotype of Spencer as a rugged individualist, supporting an exterminatory "survival of the fittest" (ignoring Darwin's adoption of the phrase). Given Spencer's profound influence on Ernst Haeckel's concept of organic integration, Richards should have been more attuned to the German reading of Spencer as a serious biological philosopher of the organic. Haeckel's conceptual debt to Spencer was immense in his developmental view of evolution: Spencer could also have been a case for a more spiritual rereading, and here an opportunity is lost.

Although Richards is deeply sympathetic to German Darwinism, he distinguishes between Haeckel as a protagonist of Darwinism and the shaping of Hitler's mentality and values. Richards is a valiant defender of Haeckel in rehabilitating him from charges of fraud and responsibility for genocide. The pivotal essay in the whole collection treats Haeckel's scientific and artistic struggles; it is trenchantly argued and backed up with vivid illustrations. However, Richards avoids engaging with Haeckel's fundamental research work not only on gastrulation and germ-layer theory but also on the underlying theory of the historical process of evolution as the driving force of developmental morphology. Richards might have figured in ideas on the evolution of the nervous system and the key contributions made by Spencer and Haeckel to understanding the ganglion and synapses. What is important with both Spencer and Haeckel is to grasp the significance of time and their sense of the state of civilization. For them, the human and the philanthropic were attributes of a civilized society. What applied to the primal and primitive did not apply to "higher," educated societies—and certain not to Imperial Germany as a highly evolved cultural state. Not unreasonably, Haeckel is situated as a faithful Darwinian rather than a proto-Nazi.

The detaching of Hitler from Darwin is carried out judiciously and reasonably. Darwin was no anti-Semite. Surprisingly, Richards sees the idea of racial hierarchy as a characteristic of Darwin's thinking, but surely for Darwin there could be no such thing as a rigid hierarchy, as there was constant variation and selection—although sexual selection took the place of natural selection in more highly evolved societies. For Hitler, a Jew was essential and unchanging, an element in a worldview based on fixed racial stereotypes. Richards sees a divide between Darwin and evolutionary biology, on the one side, and Spencer (here the misreading), Gobineau, H. S. Chamberlain, and, ultimately, Hitler, on the other. The idea is to separate Darwin from an exterminatory Social Darwinism. Richards avoids tackling the notion of struggle; and, puzzlingly, while there is discussion of Hegel, there is none of a conspicuously absent but crucial Schopenhauer.

Putting such blind spots aside, Richards convincingly argues that Darwin is not a source of Hitler's anti-Semitism and that Hitler's conception of the fixity of race was non-Darwinian. Darwin emphasized an ethic of altruism, cooperation, and community, again in contrast to Hitler, who was especially scathing about university academics. Whereas Darwin was an abolitionist with regard to human slavery, Hitler's Third Reich relied increasingly on slave labor. Richards recognizes that the Nazi biologists differed in their interpretations of Darwin—and one might also add that there was no Nazi consensus on racial science. More problematic is how Richards slips between Hitler and the wider category of "Nazi

biology.” He overlooks the significance of Himmler as a missing link between the Nazi leadership and the academic community. Hitler engaged in matters academic only minimally; much of that effort fell on Himmler, who administered the imposition of genocide through the SS. Himmler was hungry for biology and massively keen to establish the SS as an academic force. It would be reasonable to inquire as to the role of Darwinian thought in the mind-set of Mengele and fellow SS members as they made their selections for the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

Richards comes to the conclusion that for Hitler the Final Solution was political and not biological. The distinction is somewhat contrived, as the Nazi leadership might have contemptuously condemned scientists for theoretical disagreements but still relied on a biologically minded technocracy. When it comes to today’s creationist and Intelligent Design lobby, Richards convincingly establishes that their reading of Darwin is flawed and ahistorical. However, he needs a wider frame of scientific and intellectual reference in terms of the complexity of Nazi biology. In conclusion, Richards provides a valuable disentangling of Darwinian natural selection from Hitler’s ideas of struggle. What he does not accomplish in these elegantly readable essays is to disentangle Victorian ideas of social evolution (often labeled Social Darwinism) from Nazi biology. Here, there are too many links and levels. But what links Darwin, Spencer, and Haeckel, and divides them from Hitler, is that their vision of an evolutionarily advanced, civilized, and scientifically aware society is one marked by compassion, altruism, and philanthropy.