

**Peter J. Bowler**

### **Imagining a World without Darwin**

Historians often find themselves responding to claims that Darwinism was somehow ‘responsible’ for the emergence of ideologies that many of us find abhorrent. One way of addressing this issue would be to apply the increasingly popular technique of counterfactual history. What would the world have been like if Darwin had not been there to write the *Origin of Species* – would there still have been ideologies similar to what we call ‘social Darwinism’?

If evolution by natural selection was ‘in the air’ at the time, then someone else would soon have proposed the theory, although this scenario implies that the scientific innovation was derivative and cannot have been the driving force of ideological change. But if – as some historians believe – Darwin’s work was truly unique, then we can imagine a world in which the idea of natural selection did not become part of the late nineteenth-century debates (although the idea of evolution in a more general sense probably would have emerged). In this case, would there have been the same level of support for racism, and the same endorsement of an ideology of ‘progress through struggle’? I will argue that there would, because even in our world much of the support for these positions emerged independently of Darwin’s theory of natural selection. The anthropologists and biologists who created a hierarchy of racial types were either not evolutionists, or tended to favor non-Darwinian theories of evolution. Writers such as Herbert Spencer would have portrayed individual struggle as something which promoted individual self-development, not as an agent for eliminating the unfit. The possibility that weaker races and nations would eventually face extinction could have been recognized without anyone thinking that individualistic natural selection was the mechanism of progress.

The one area where it might be easier to imagine the debates unfolding in a different direction is the later emergence of eugenics. Would this have happened without the Darwinian emphasis on the similarity between artificial and natural selection? There are certainly other sources of hereditarian thinking, and of the idea that the race could be purified by excising the unfit. But Darwinism’s emphasis on the constant elimination of maladaptive individuals may have encouraged harsher applications of these principles. However this question might be resolved, counterfactual history suggests that this is the area we need to focus on most actively when responding to those who think that Darwinism is responsible for its social applications.