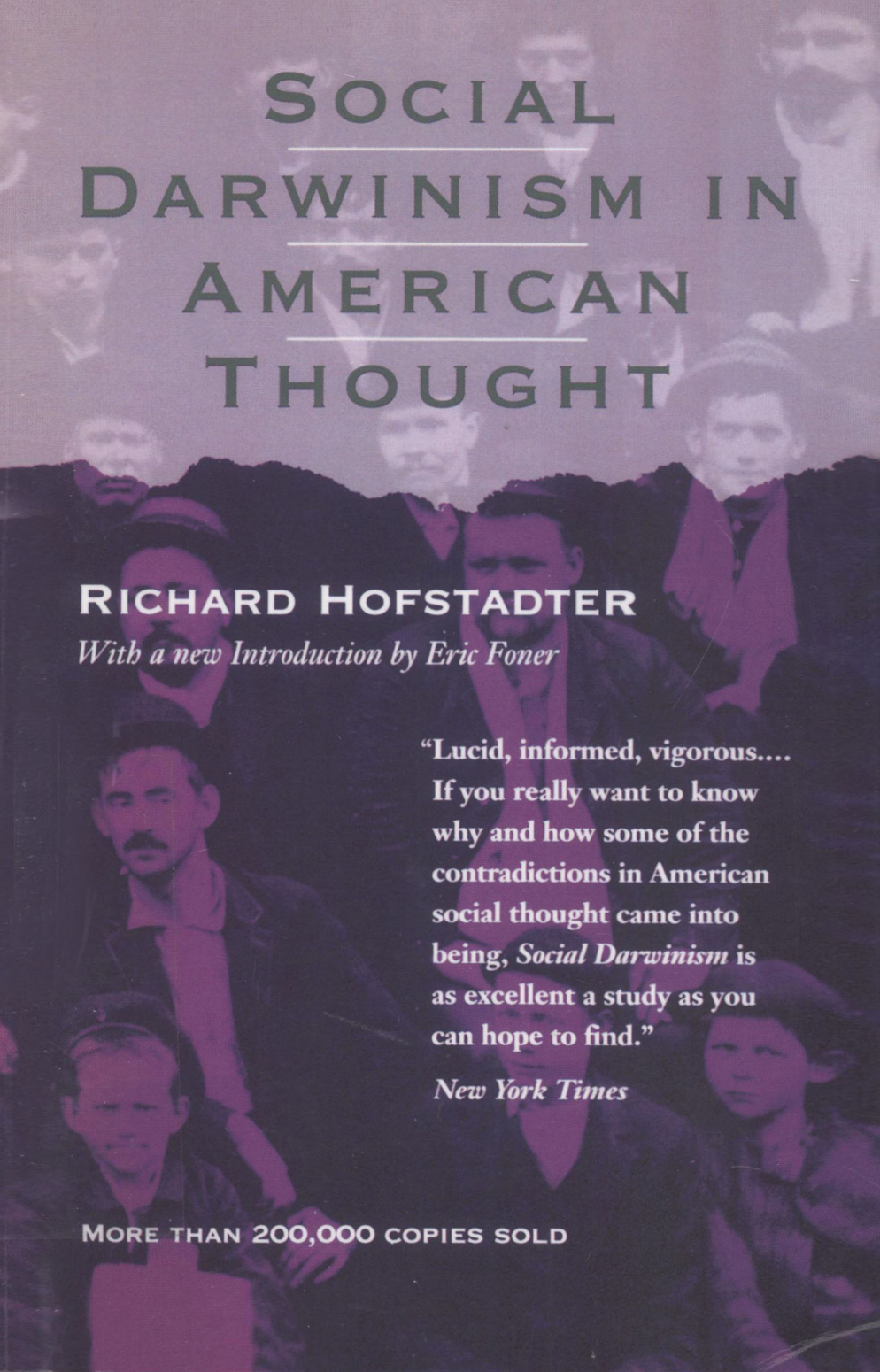
Social Darwinism in American Thought



Richard Hofstadter

With a new Introduction by Eric Foner

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Social Darwinism in American Thought

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Social Darwinism in American Thought

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THIS EDITION
IS FOR MY CHILDREN
DAN AND SARAH

Introduction

Two decades have now elapsed since the untimely death of Richard Hofstadter. Despite the sweeping transformation of historical scholarship during these years, his writings continue to exert a powerful influence on how scholars and general readers alike understand the American past. Since his death, the study of political ideas—the recurring theme of Hofstadter's work—has to a considerable extent been eclipsed by the histories of family life, race relations, popular culture, and a host of other social concerns. The writings of many of his contemporaries are now all but forgotten, yet because of his penetrating intellect and sparkling literary style, Hofstadter still commands the attention of anyone who wishes to think seriously about the American past. The reissue of his first book, *Social Darwinism in American Thought,* provides an opportune moment to consider the circumstances of its composition and the reasons for its enduring influence.

Richard Hofstadter was born in 1916 in Buffalo, New York, the son of a Jewish father and a mother of German Lutheran descent. After graduating from high school in 1933, he entered the University of Buffalo, where he majored in philosophy and minored in history. As for so many others of his generation, his formative intellectual and political experience was the Great Depression. Buffalo, a major industrial center, was particularly hard hit by unemployment and social dislocation. The Depression, Hofstadter later recalled, "started me thinking about the world. . . . It was as clear as day that something had to change. . . . You had to decide, in the first instance, whether you were a Marxist or an American liberal."[1] At the university, Hofstadter gravitated toward a

group of left-wing students, including the brilliant and "sometimes overpowering" (as Alfred Kazin later described her) Felice Swados, read Marx and Lenin, and joined the Young Communist League.[2]

In 1936, on the eve of his graduation, Hofstadter and Felice were married and subsequently moved to New York. Felice first worked for the National Maritime Union and International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and then took a job as a copy editor at *Time*, while Hofstadter enrolled in the graduate history program at Columbia University. Both became part of New York's broad radical political culture that centered on the Communist party in the era of the Popular Front. Hofstadter would later describe himself (with some exaggeration) as "by temperament quite conservative and timid and acquiescent,"[3] and it seems that the dynamic Felice, a committed political activist, animated their engagement with radicalism. Nonetheless, politics for Hofstadter was much more than a passing fancy; he identified himself as a Marxist and, in apartment discussions and in his correspondence with Felice's brother Harvey Swados, took part in the doctrinal debates between Communists, Trotskyists, Schachtmanites, and others that flourished in the world of New York's radical intelligentsia.

In 1938, Hofstadter joined the Communist party's unit at Columbia. The decision, taken with some reluctance (he had already startled some of his friends by concluding that the Moscow purge trials were "phony") reflected a craving for decisive action after "the hours I have spent jawing about the thing." As he explained to his brother-in-law: "I join without enthusiasm but with a sense of obligation. . . . My fundamental reason for joining is that I don't like capitalism and want to get rid of it. I am tired of talking. . . . The party is making a very profound contribution to the radicalization of the American people. . . . I prefer to go along with it now."[4]

Hofstadter, however, did not prove to be a very committed party member. He found meetings "dull" and chafed at what he considered the party's intellectual regimentation. By February 1939 he had "quietly eased myself out." His break

became irreversible in September, after the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.[5] There followed a rapid and deep disillusionment—with the party (run by "glorified clerks"), with the Soviet Union ("essentially undemocratic"), and eventually with Marxism itself.[6] Yet for some years, Hofstadter continued to regard himself as a radical. "I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it," he wrote Harvey Swados soon after leaving the party. Never again, however, would he devote his energies in any sustained manner to a political cause. He became more and more preoccupied with the thought that intellectuals were unlikely to find a comfortable home in any socialist society likely to emerge in his lifetime. "People like us," he wrote, ". . . have become permanently alienated from the spirit of revolutionary movements. . . . We are not the beneficiaries of capitalism, but we will not be the beneficiaries of the socialism of the 20th century. We are the people with no place to go."[7]

Although Hofstadter abandoned active politics after 1939, his earliest work as a historian reflected his continuing intellectual engagement with radicalism. His Columbia master's thesis, written in 1938, dealt with the plight of southern sharecroppers, a contemporary problem that had become the focus of intense organizing efforts by Socialists and Communists.[8] Hofstadter showed how the benefits of New Deal agricultural policies in the cotton states flowed to large landowners, while the sharecroppers' conditions only worsened. The essay presented a devastating indictment of the Roosevelt administration for pandering to the South's undemocratic elite. Its critical evaluation of Roosevelt, a common attitude among New York radicals, would persist in Hofstadter's writings long after the political impulse that inspired the thesis had faded.

As with many others who came of age in the 1930's, Hofstadter's general intellectual approach was framed by Marxism, but in application to the American past, the iconoclastic materialism of Charles A. Beard was his greatest inspiration. "Beard was really *the* exciting influence on me," Hofstadter later remarked.[9] Beard taught that American his-

tory had been shaped by the struggle of competing economic groups, primarily farmers, industrialists, and workers. Underlying the clashing rhetoric of political leaders lay naked self-interest; the Civil War, for example, should be understood essentially as a transfer of political power from southern agrarians to northern capitalists. Differences over the tariff had more to do with its origins than with the debate over slavery. Hofstadter's first published essay, a "note" in a 1938 issue of the *American Historical Review,* took issue with Beard's emphasis on the tariff as a basic cause of the Civil War, while accepting the premise that economic self-interest lay at the root of political behavior.[10] (The homestead issue, Hofstadter argued, far outweighed the tariff as a source of sectional tension.) The article inaugurated a dialogue with the Beardian tradition that shaped much of Hofstadter's subsequent career.

While Beard devoted little attention to political ideas, seeing them as mere masks for economic self-interest, Hofstadter soon became attracted to the study of American social thought. His interest was encouraged by Merle Curti, a Marxist Columbia professor with whom Hofstadter by 1939 had formed, according to Felice, a "mutual admiration society."[11] Other than his relationship with Curti, however, Hofstadter was not particularly happy at Columbia. For three years running, he was refused financial aid. Hofstadter was gripped by a sense of unfair treatment. "The guys who got the fellowships," he complained, "are little shits who never accomplished or published anything."[12] (None of them, one can assume, had, like Hofstadter, published in the *AHR.*)

Denied financial aid, Hofstadter was forced to seek a teaching job. In the spring of 1940, he obtained a part-time position in the evening session of Brooklyn College. His first full-time job was at the downtown branch of City College, where a position opened in the spring of 1941 because of the forced departure of a professor accused of membership in the Communist party. The New York legislature's Rapp-Coudert Committee had been investigating "subversive" influences within the city colleges; eventually, some forty teachers were

fired or forced to resign after being named by informants. Students initially boycotted Hofstadter's lectures as a show of support for his purged predecessor, but eventually they returned to the classroom. Ironically, Hofstadter's first full-time job resulted from the flourishing of the kind of political paranoia that he would later lament in his historical writings.

Meanwhile, having passed his comprehensive examinations, Hofstadter set out in quest of a dissertation topic. In a letter to his brother-in-law that typified Hofstadter's wry, self-deprecating sense of humor, he described the process. First, he considered writing a biography of "the old rascal Ben Wade" (the Radical Republican senator from Ohio) only to discover that Wade had destroyed most of his papers. Then he turned to Simon Cameron, Lincoln's first secretary of war, but abandoned that subject when he heard that "somebody from Indiana had been working on Cameron for 15 years." Columbia professor John A. Krout suggested a biography of Jeremiah Wadsworth, a colonial merchant who not only left abundant papers but had some admirers willing to help fund biographical research. Hofstadter, however, did not pursue the idea far—he and Felice considered Wadsworth inconsequential and kept referring to him as Jedediah Hockenpfuss. Finally, with Curti's approval, he settled on social Darwinism.[13] By mid-1940, he was hard at work, and two years later, at the precocious age of twenty-six, he completed the dissertation. *Social Darwinism in American Thought* was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1944.

However serendipitous the process by which he found it, social Darwinism was the perfect subject for the young Hofstadter. It was a big topic, likely to interest a large audience, and it combined his growing interest in the history of social thought with his continuing alienation from American capitalism. It was the kind of subject, Felice wrote Harvey, "in which all his friends want to have a hand." "But in which they won't," Hofstadter added. The book focuses on the late nineteenth century and ends in 1915, the year before Hofstadter's birth. But, as he later observes, the "emotional resonances" that shaped his approach to the subject were those of his own

youth, when conservatives used arguments descended from social Darwinism to justify resistance to radical political movements and government efforts to alleviate inequality. Studying social Darwinism helped explain "the disparity between our official individualism and the bitter facts of life as anyone could see them during the great depression."[14]

Social Darwinism in American Thought describes the broad impact on intellectual life of the scientific writings of Charles Darwin and the growing use of such Darwinian ideas as "natural selection," "survival of the fittest," and "the struggle for existence" to reinforce conservative, laissez-faire individualism. The book begins by tracing the conquest of Darwinian ideas among American scientists and liberal Protestant theologians, a conquest so complete that by the Gilded Age "every serious thinker felt obligated to reckon with" the implications of Darwin's writings. Hofstadter then examines the "vogue" of Herbert Spencer, the English philosopher who did more than any other individual to define nineteenth-century conservatism. Spencer, of course, preceded Darwin; well before the publication of *The Origin of Species,* Spencer not only coined the term "survival of the fittest" but developed a powerful critique of all forms of state interference with the "natural" workings of society, including regulation of business and public assistance to the poor. But Spencer's followers seized upon the authority of Darwin's work to claim scientific legitimacy for their outlook and to press home the analogy between the natural and social worlds, both of which, they claimed, evolved according to natural laws.

From Spencer, Hofstadter turns to a consideration of William Graham Sumner, the most influential American social Darwinist, whose writings glorified the competitive social order and justified existing social inequalities as the result of natural selection. Combining Darwinian ideas with the Protestant work ethic and classical economics, Sumner condemned any idea of government activism, preferring instead a complete "abnegation of state power." He offered defenders of the economic status quo a compelling rationale for opposing the demands of labor unions, Grangers, and others

seeking to interfere with the "natural" workings of the social order.

Despite the book's title and the deftness with which he sketches the lineaments of social Darwinism in its opening chapters, Hofstadter actually devotes more attention to the theory's critics than its proponents. For a time, social Darwinism reigned supreme in American thought. But beginning in the 1880's, it came under attack from many sources—clergymen shocked by the inequities of the emerging industrial order and the harshness of unbridled competition, reformers proposing to unleash state activism in the service of social equality, and intellectuals of the emerging social sciences. Hofstadter makes no effort to disguise his distaste for the social Darwinists or his sympathy for the critics, especially the sociologists and philosophers who believed intellectuals could guide social progress (a view extremely congenial to Hofstadter at the time he was writing). In the 1880's, sociologist Lester Ward pointed out that economic competition bred not simply individual advancement but giant new corporations whose economic might needed to be held in check by government, and he ridiculed the social Darwinists' "fundamental error" that "the favors of the world are distributed entirely according to merit." But Hofstadter's true heroes were the early twentieth-century Pragmatists. William James destroyed Spencer's hold on philosophical thought by pointing to the elements of psychology—sentiment, emotion, and so on—ignored in the Darwinian model and by insisting that human intelligence enabled people to alter their own environment, thus rendering pointless the analogy with nature. James, however, evinced little interest in current events. Hofstadter identified more closely with John Dewey, whom he presents as a model of the socially responsible intellectual, the architect of a "new collectivism" in which an activist state attempts to guide and improve society.

By the turn of the century, social Darwinism was in full retreat. But even as Darwinian individualism waned, Darwinian ideas continued to influence social thinking in other ways. Rather than individuals striving for advancement, the strug-

gling units of the analogy with nature became collectives—especially nations and races. With the United States emerging as a world power from the Spanish-American War, writers like John Fiske and Albert J. Beveridge marshaled Darwinian ideas in the service of imperialism, to legitimate the world-wide subordination of "inferior" races to Anglo-Saxon hegemony. In the eugenics movement that flourished in the early years of this century, Darwinism helped to underwrite the idea that immigration of less "fit" peoples was lowering the standard of American intelligence. Fortunately, the "racist-military" phase of social Darwinism was as thoroughly discredited by World War I, when it seemed uncomfortably akin to German militarism, as conservative individualism had been by the attacks of progressive social scientists.

When Hofstadter tries to *explain* the rise and fall of social Darwinism, he falls back on the base-superstructure model shared by Marxists and Beardians in the 1930's. Hofstadter recognizes that there was nothing inevitable in the appropriation of Darwinism for conservative purposes. Marx, after all, was so impressed by *The Origin of Species,* which dethroned revealed religion and vindicated the idea of progress through ceaseless struggle (struggle among classes, in his reading, rather than individuals), that he proposed to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin—an honor the latter declined. How then to account for the ascendancy, until the 1890's, of individualist, laissez-faire Darwinism? The reason, Hofstadter writes, was that social Darwinism served the needs of those groups that controlled the "raw, aggressive, industrial society" of the Gilded Age. Spencer, Sumner, and the other social Darwinians were telling businessmen and political leaders what they wanted to hear. Subsequently, it was not merely the penetrating criticism of Ward, Dewey, and others, but the middle class's growing disenchantment with unbridled competition, Hofstadter argues, that led it to repudiate social Darwinism and adopt a more reform-minded social outlook in the Progressive era.

Hofstadter's concluding thoughts amount to a reaffirmation both of the Beardian approach and of his own status as a

radical intellectual. The rise and fall of social Darwinism, he writes, exemplified the "rule" that "changes in the structure of social ideas wait on general changes in economic and political life" and that ideas win wide acceptance based less on "truth and logic" than their "suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of social interests." This, he adds, was "one of the great difficulties that must be faced by rational strategists of social change." Clearly, Hofstadter still viewed economic self-interest as the basis of political action, and clearly he identified with those "rational strategists of social change" who hoped to move the nation beyond social Darwinism's legacy.

Actually, Hofstadter offered no independent analysis of either the structure of American society or the ideas of most businessmen or politicians. His effort to explain social Darwinism's rise and fall is a kind of obiter dictum, largely confined to his brief concluding chapter. Indeed, Hofstadter later reflected that the book may have inadvertently encouraged the "intellectualist fallacy" by exaggerating the impact of ideas without placing them in the social context from which they sprang.[15] *Social Darwinism* is a work of intellectual history, not an examination of how ideas reflect economic structures. And as such, it retains much of its vitality half a century after it was written. The book's qualities would remain hallmarks of Hofstadter's subsequent writing—among them an amazing lucidity in presenting complex ideas, the ability to sprinkle his text with apt quotes that make precisely the right point, the capacity to bring past individuals to life in telling portraits. For a dissertation, it is a work of remarkable range, drawing not only on the writings of sociologists and philosophers but also on novels, treatises, sermons, and popular magazines to explore the debates unleashed by Darwinism. Very much a product of a specific moment in American history, it transcends the particulars of its origins to offer a compelling portrait of a critical period in the development of American thought. To the end of his life, Hofstadter's writings would center on *Social Darwinism's* underlying themes—

the evolution of social thought, the social context of ideologies, and the role of ideas in politics.

Social Darwinism has had an impact matched by few books of its generation. Hofstadter did not invent the term social Darwinism, which originated in Europe in the 1880's and crossed the Atlantic in the early twentieth century. But before he wrote, it was used only on rare occasions; he made it a standard shorthand for a complex of late-nineteenth-century ideas, a familiar part of the lexicon of social thought. The book demonstrates Hofstadter's ability, even in a dissertation, to move beyond the academic readership to address a broad general public. Since its appearance in a revised paperback edition in 1955 (Hofstadter left the argument unchanged but added an author's note and made several hundred "purely stylistic" alterations), it has sold more than 200,000 copies.[16]

Although, thanks to Hofstadter, social Darwinism has earned a permanent place in the vocabulary of intellectual history, his analysis has not escaped criticism. While few scholars have challenged Hofstadter's account of the main currents of late-nineteenth-century American thought, some have cast doubt on the extent of Darwin's influence on both laissez-faire conservatives and their liberal and radical critics. Soon after Hofstadter's revised edition appeared, Irvin G. Wyllie published an influential essay disputing Darwin's impact on American businessmen. Entrepreneurs, he found, justified the accumulation of wealth not by appealing to a vision of ruthless competition in which the success of some meant the ruin of others but by reference to hard work, Christian philanthropy, and the conviction that the creation of wealth benefited society as a whole.[17]

Since Hofstadter had devoted little attention to businessmen, apart from Andrew Carnegie, Wyllie's findings did not significantly affect the book's main argument. More damaging was the criticism advanced by Robert C. Bannister, who argued that Hofstadter had greatly exaggerated Darwin's influence on social thinkers themselves.[18] Remarkably few late-nineteenth-century writers, Bannister found, either invoked Darwin's authority, referred directly to biological evo-

lution, or used Darwinian terminology such as survival of the fittest and the struggle for existence. The roots of their thought lay elsewhere, in classical economics and a preoccupation with defending property rights and limiting the power of the state. They were more likely to appeal to the authority of Adam Smith than Darwin, more likely to be influenced by contemporary events such as the 1877 railroad strike than by analogies to biological evolution. In fact, Bannister concluded, social Darwinism existed mainly as an "epithet," a label devised by advocates of a reforming state to stigmatize laissez-faire conservatism.

Hofstadter, to be sure, never claimed that Darwin created Gilded Age individualism; rather, he wrote, Darwinian categories supplemented an existing vocabulary derived from laissez-faire economics. Moreover, Bannister's definition of social Darwinism, requiring explicit use of Darwinian language, ignores less direct influences on social thought and more subtle adaptations of scientific reasoning. Toward the end of his life, Hofstadter praised his critic for careful reading of sources, but went on to suggest that "intellectual history, even as made by men who try to be rational and who try to regard distinctions, proceeds by more gross distinctions than you are aware of."[19] This was a fairly devastating critique of Bannister's approach (which, to his credit, Bannister included in the introduction to his own book). Nonetheless, Bannister's basic point struck home. Today, writers who examine Gilded Age conservatism are likely to locate its primary sources in realms other than Darwinism. Spencer's influence, it is true, still looms large; some have even suggested that the body of thought Hofstadter described ought to be called social Spencerism, not social Darwinism.[20]

This, however, would be a mistake, for if Hofstadter perhaps exaggerated Darwin's influence, he was certainly correct in identifying the idea that a science of society could be developed as all but ubiquitous among late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century intellectuals. Darwin's writings helped to catalyze this belief, which became a major point of self-definition and self-justification for intellectuals at a time when,

through the rise of social science, their role in American society was becoming institutionalized. Hofstadter's central insight—that analogies with science helped to shape the way Americans perceived and interpreted issues from the differences between races and classes to the implications of state intervention in the economy—remains the starting point for serious investigations of American thought during the Gilded Age.[21]

Inevitably, *Social Darwinism* now seems in some ways dated. Today, in the wake of the "new social history," historians are more cognizant of the many groups that make up American society and no longer write confidently, as Hofstadter did, of a single "public mind." Given the pervasive impact of literary deconstruction, it seems decidedly (perhaps refreshingly) old-fashioned to assume, with Hofstadter, that texts have a single, rationally ascertainable meaning. But the most striking difference between Hofstadter's cast of mind and that of our own time lies in his resolute conviction that social Darwinism was an unfortunate but thankfully closed chapter in the history of social thought. Hofstadter wrote from the certainty that social Darwinism was demonstrably wrong, that biological analogies are "utterly useless" in understanding human society, that this episode had all been some kind of "ghastly mistake."

"A resurgence of social Darwinism . . . ," Hofstadter did note, was "always a possibility so long as there is a strong element of predacity in society." But he could hardly have foreseen the resurrection in the 1980's of biological explanations for human development[22] and of the social Darwinist mentality, if not the name itself: that government should not intervene to affect the "natural" workings of the economy, that the distribution of rewards within society reflects individual merit rather than historical circumstances, that the plight of the less fortunate, whether individuals or races, arises from their own failings. Had he lived to see social Darwinism's recrudescence, Hofstadter would certainly have noted how two previously distinct strands of this ideology have merged in today's conservatism—the laissez-faire individualism of a