

EVOLUTION AND THE "MYTH" OF DARWIN

P. Brandt George
 Folklore Institute
 Indiana University

Legends, beliefs, and anecdotes have often developed about famous personalities of the Arts, Sciences, and Politics, national and international. Folk Beliefs concerning, Einstein, Lincoln, Churchill, and Sinatra are relatively well-known and popular. Few of these little bits of folklore have, however, had such an overwhelming popularity and have been as misleading as the ideas and attitudes held, by layman and scientist alike, about Charles Darwin. It is the purpose of this study to delve into certain popular conceptions concerning the nature of the role and importance of Charles Darwin in the development of biological and social evolutionary thought, with special reference to the British Anthropological School.

We tend to think as did Boas,¹ Herskovits,² and Lévi-Strauss³ that evolution as a theory originated in the mind of Darwin, and that the concept of social evolution was a simple application of Darwin's biological evolutionary laws to social or cultural phenomena.

Although it is true that Darwin influenced the later development of biological and social thought, evolution did not originate with him. His writing was a natural extension of a long chain of events reaching back at least to the Crusades and the result of thoughts which go back at least as far as Aristotle. Before that the concept was called "adaptation" or "progress." It was a popular and pervasive idea in the minds of men long before Darwin's appearance on the scene. In reality, Darwin only changed the name from "progress" to "evolution." True, he added more information but the underlying concept was the same. He did not set out to prove evolution as a theory. To him it was a given; an indisputable fact. He undertook only to explain the process as it worked in the biological world.

The idea of adaptation goes at least back to Aristotle who mentions a progression from the simpler animals to the more complex man, although he laid out no scheme for that development. Leslie White points out that Lucretius in the first century B.C. in his work *De Rerum Natura* presented a theory of cultural evolution. Ibn Khaldun in the fifteenth century, Hume, Turgot, Condorcet, Emanuel Kant, and Johann Gottfried von Herder of the eighteenth century, and many other non-biological writers and thinkers wrote on theories of cultural evolution and a few even had biological schemes.⁴ Numerous others could also be mentioned who wrote before the nineteenth century.

The question comes to the mind of this author that if in fact Darwin was not the first and the most important, and that if the ideas of adaptation or evolution were known before the beginning of the nineteenth century, why weren't these ideas important until about the middle of that century? Why hadn't they swept the world as they did in Darwin's time?

The answer may be found, if we can believe Kardiner and Preble, in the events which led to the great social and political changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In feudalistic Central and Western Europe, fatalism was the order of the day. The prevailing mindset was

one of fixity, of stability. The Church taught that one's life was to be given to God. God willed that some should live the high life and that others should suffer. One was born into the position assigned to him by the supernatural and it had to be accepted. The few opportunities that did exist were in the hands of the clergy and the landed gentry. The inequality of the situation was due to God's will and was out of the control of man. Almost all of the social, political, religious, and economic institutions supported the idea that feudalism was the natural state of affairs and that it could not and should not be conceived as being otherwise.

However, during and after the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries a new class began to emerge and grow within the feudal system. This middle class of merchants served the needs of the serf and the aristocrat alike without, at least in the beginning, damaging either one. These merchants opened up the lines of communication and broadened the range of human relations which began the slow process which would eventually lead to the downfall of feudalism. As business boomed the merchant class began to grow in size and power. The establishment of the marketing machinery necessary for their trade opened up new and more opportunities for everyone. They began to challenge the idea of salvation with its otherworldly focus with the idea of enjoyment of the here and now. This middle class ethos spread and finally led in part to the first real signs of physical and philosophical breakdown of feudalism, resulting in the Reformation and the curbing of the influence of the Church in the sixteenth century.

The culture and ethos of the merchant class pressured its way in to eventually take over. While the fixed hierarchy with its anxieties and its restraints was the key to feudalism, the progressive optimism which followed was an expression of the new ideas and opportunities opened by the new bourgeois way of life.

The Industrial Revolution and urbanization developed out of this change of ethos and the further development of new opportunities helped the movement along. The French Revolution beginning around 1789 should not be thought of as the beginning of the movement where the concepts of individual ability and character were emphasized but rather as the end result of that movement. The Revolution and the following Napoleonic Wars did much to destroy the socio-political institutions that had ceased to function long before.

As a result of the revolutions, political and industrial, the masses saw institutions rise and fall. Thus they were no longer willing to put stock in the idea of stability in the social order. Moreover they began to have the idea well in mind that they, and not just God, had something to say about the order of things. Man, the individual had become the central focus of thought.⁵ "The theory of evolution became popular when it did because it was an accurate reflection of the total ethos of the nineteenth century...the intense interest that developed during this period in physiology, anthropology, and psychology was...a direct result of man's changed concept of himself."⁶

Kardiner and Preble, as well as Anthony F. C. Wallace, in their biographical sketches of Darwin outline the intellectual atmosphere of nineteenth century England as Darwin knew it. Wallace says that "The idea of social

progress...had been well entrenched since the seventeenth century and by Darwin's time was more than a theory; it was a doctrine, a dogma, an article of faith. The doctrine of progress was simply that, despite temporary lapses, absolute improvement in man's worldly and moral well-being was possible; that such improvement had occurred in the past and might confidently be expected in the future. Nineteenth century England was permeated by the idea of progress: it was the basis of political, economic and social theory, and the very atmosphere of intellectual life."⁷

Darwin, born in 1809, grew up surrounded by relatives that applied the concept of progress to everyday life. His maternal grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, the potter, as well as his uncles, his own father and mother, were all progressive liberal Whigs. They were reformers aiming at the progressive improvement of mankind through the abolition of slavery, reducing the power of the landed gentry in favor of the manufacturing and commercial interests. They wanted to extend suffrage and they evaluated social institutions not by their antiquity but by their usefulness.

In the fields of science, long before the birth of Charles Darwin, his paternal grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had published a theory of biological evolution similar to the later theory of his grandson. This had been followed by the great Lamarck who outlined the process of evolution minus Darwin's natural selection. Charles was familiar also with the finds of ancient civilizations and was acquainted with the cultural evolutionary scheme of the progressive movement through the Stone Age to the Bronze Age to the Iron Age well established and widely held before 1850. He was a close friend of Charles Lyell and familiar with his The Principles of Geology published in 1833 in which Lyell established the antiquity of the earth and outlined the successive development of the earth's strata. He also had inferred biological evolution in the occurrence of fossilized remains found in geological strata.

Progress was also the central theme of the budding science of Anthropology with whose major writings Darwin was familiar before setting sail on the H.M.S. Beagle. He had read a lot of the comparative ethnographies of the time. Seven years before the publication of The Origin of Species in 1859, Spencer wrote "The Development Hypothesis" in which he states, "Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the Development of Society, of Government, of Manufacturing, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through successive differentiations holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous is that in which progress essentially exists."⁸ Although at sea, Darwin read it.

In The Voyage of the Beagle, in his discussion of the Indians of Tierra del Fuego and the Australian aborigines, Darwin shows that he had some idea or concept of cultural evolution with the idea of sequential development. From his comments it is rather obvious that Darwin was a cultural evolutionist at the time of his round-the-world trip in the 1830's when he was still gathering the data that would lead to the development of his theory of how evolution works in the biological world, and which would not appear until some twenty years later. Thus it should be clear that Darwin did not originate the idea of evolution, cultural nor biological. It had existed and had been accepted before Darwin's writing of The Origin

of Species.

Not only does this author feel that Darwin did not originate the idea of evolution but he doubts that Darwin had any real effect on British anthropological evolutionary theories. This can be shown by simply comparing their major underlying assumptions and general trends in the concepts of cultural and biological evolution. The Anthropologists, Spencer, Tylor, Lang, et al. hypothesized that human society began separately in different places at different times but that each group evolved through the same set of parallel sequences. None of these steps could be avoided nor could the chronological order change. Some societies evolved faster than others but all passed through identical stages. The ancestors of the British Anthropologists were believed to have passed through a stage where they were culturally parallel with the Australian aborigines with the same implements, ideas, and social patterns. Social evolution was seen in terms of a unilinear development which explained the similarities in distinct cultures through the ideas of polygenesis and parallel development. Since all cultures passed through identical stages it was necessary that they developed the same things. There had been no diffusion.

The multilinear biological evolution as conceived by Darwin meant that the development of the various species had started in different times and places and had evolved along different lines everywhere. Thus one specific form developed in one place at one point in history and any occurrence of that form outside of its area of origin was explained in terms of movement or migration of, if you will, diffusion.

Thus the British Anthropological Evolutionists were, in general, subscribing to the concepts of unilinear, polygenetic, parallel evolution with no allowance for diffusion. Darwin, on the other hand, felt that evolution had been multilinear and that monogenesis and diffusion had occurred. The two concepts are diametrically opposed. Social evolutionary thought might have yielded more fruitfully if it had been influenced by the theories of Darwin.

The only feature that the two concepts hold in common is the idea of survivals. Both proposed that there are certain things existing in the contemporary setting that now have no function. They are nothing more than remnants or survivals from past stages of evolution. For the Anthropologist these vestigial remains were the quaint customs and superstitions of the English peasants. Darwin saw man's appendix as an example of a biological survival.

So, it might appear that Darwin did introduce the theory of survivals to the Anthropologists, but, sadly, such is not the case. Prior to Darwin, biologists had commented on obvious survivals in the biological world and Tylor, the Anthropologist, the "Father of the concept of survivals," had become interested in these cultural phenomena as early as 1856 - three years before the publication of The Origin of Species.

If he was not the originator of the idea of evolution and did not influence British social anthropological thinking, why is Darwin always conceived of as the protagonist in the development of this theory? What were his contributions which make him so well remembered? According to Ernst Mayr, Darwin's significant contributions were the overwhelming mass of data which demonstrated evolution in the biological world and the

logical and biologically well substantiated mechanism that accounted for evolutionary change, namely, the concept of natural selection.⁹ George Peter Murdock says that he is the one who "...first lifted the concept of evolution from the level of philosophy to that of science."¹⁰

Perhaps the real reason for the popular thought of Darwin as the "Father of Evolution" comes from the misuse of his concept of natural selection and the accompanying idea of survival of the fittest. These definitely influenced the political and economic developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The idea of the survival of the fittest was used to justify some of the most ruthless political and economic wheelings and dealings in the history of man.

It is hoped that this article has served to clarify some of the misconceptions that have composed the "Myth" of Charles Darwin and his role in the development evolutionary theorizing in the fields of Anthropology and Folklore. It should be clear that Darwin was not the "Father of Evolution," but rather only one of a long list of evolutionary theorists. He was not important as the originator of Evolution as a concept but rather for clarifying it and adding to the already existing data and theory of his time. It should also be clear that Darwin cannot be blamed for the mistakes of men like Spencer, Tylor, Lang, Frazer, Morgan and others of the British Anthropological School in their attempts to develop cultural evolutionary schemes.

NOTES

1. Franz Boas, Mind of Primitive Man (New York: 1911), p. 175.
2. Melville J. Herskovits, The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples (New York: 1940), p. 35.
3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Histoire et Ethnologie," Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 58 (1949): 365.
4. Leslie White, "The Concept of Evolution in Cultural Anthropology," Evolution and Anthropology: A Centennial Appraisal (Washington, D.C.: 1959): 107.
5. Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble, They Studied Man (New York: Mentor Books, New American Library, 1961), pp. 225-237.
6. Ibid., p. 236.
7. Anthony F. C. Wallace, Religion: An Anthropological View (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 39-40.
8. Kardiner and Preble, op. cit., p. 36.
9. Ernst Mayr, "Darwin and the Evolutionary Theory in Biology," Evolution and Anthropology: A Centennial Appraisal (Washington, D.C.: 1959), p. 1.
10. George Peter Murdock, "The Concept of Evolution in Cultural Anthropology" in Ibid., p. 126.