

Social Evolution

The aim of this workshop is to explore the impact of Darwin's Theory of Evolution on our understanding of humans, society and social worlds. We will be thinking specifically about Social Darwinism and Social Evolution.

We would like you think about how useful a theory that was developed to explain changes in the natural world is for understanding people and how their societies are structured. Also we would like you to consider some of the potential negatives involved in the unthinking application of this theory.

Social Darwinism
The theory that persons, groups, and races are subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin had perceived in plants and animals in the natural world. It links the concept of "Evolution" to social and political issues.
Key concepts:
1. 'the survival of the fittest' (Herbert Spencer) 2. Progress
Implications:
i. Society is made up of superior and inferior groups with the possibility of the former dominating the latter; ii. Application to social policy? iii. Secularisation of society...?
Some of the institutionalised negatives of social Darwinism:
• Eugenics • Racial inferiority: Fascist/Nazi ideologies of the 20th century • Racial inferiority: annihilation of the Tasmanian Aborigines • Racial inferiority: Apartheid • Racial superiority: relationship between Europe and her colonies
Responses:
Postcolonialism

Social Evolution

Exploring the development of culture(s) through time

Applies evolutionary theory to social change: idea that societies become increasingly and inexorably complex through time: simple societies evolve into complex states. Assumes that most cultures pass through the same series of stages to arrive, ultimately, at a common end.

Concept of progression of society has origins in the Enlightenment.

Evolutionary schemes applied to societies

Montesquieu (Enlightenment): three stage system

- Hunting or savagery
- Herding or barbarism
- Civilization

Adopted by Morgan (1877): *Ancient Society*

Neo-Evolutionary Theory (Elman Service)

Concept of emergence, zenith and inevitable decline: how is this written into historical and archaeological narratives?

What about potential links with Marxism?

Darwinism Activity: Film Viewing

We will be watching an extract from *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002)

Please make notes throughout the film viewing whenever you identify something which relates to either Social Darwinism and/or Social Evolutionary theory. We will refer back to these in our discussion.

1. How can we see Social Darwinism being implemented in Australia in the early 20th century?
2. Can we identify any application of Cultural Evolutionary theory in this film?
3. Is there any way in which we might see a positive application of Darwin's ideas?
4. How has viewing this film informed your own understanding of the social application of evolutionary ideas, in particular with respect to your own area of archaeology?