

# Darwin is the universal acid that affects everything

A review of  
*The Political Gene:  
How Darwin's Ideas  
Changed Politics*  
by Dennis Sewell  
Picador, London, 2009

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According to evolutionist Daniel Dennett, Darwinism is the universal acid that affects everything.<sup>1</sup> Dennis Sewell does an excellent job documenting this claim. Sewell, a journalist and broadcaster, has assembled a well-written review of the political uses and abuses of Darwinism. He has documented how often—and how easily—Darwinism has been harnessed for sinister political ends by a wide assortment of persons and movements laboring under a variety of political persuasions from radical right to extreme left. The history of Darwinism's critical role in eugenics and Nazism is told in an engaging way that reads like a novel. He shows that, although racism existed before Darwin, Darwinism gave the human inferior-superior racial hierarchy theory the respectability and authority of science, increasing the problem of racism by an order of magnitude.

This authority inspired the eugenics movement that swept the world for parts of the last two centuries. Sewell focuses on the practical and political results of Darwinism, not its validity. For example, in researching eugenics his focus is not on the theoretical but on understanding

“... how a tightly knit group of scientists (and most of the main actors in this story were scientists—biologists, zoologists, psychologists and doctors) went about trying to sell an esoteric

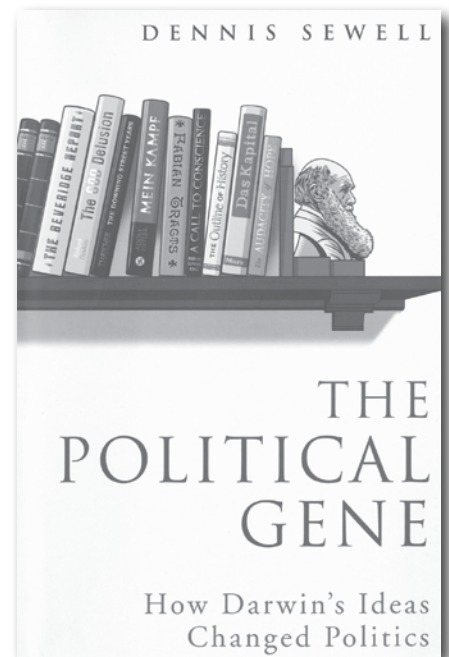
idea to the general public; how they organized, mobilized, and influenced politicians; and how they succeeded in getting laws enacted to suit their ideological purposes” (pp. xi–xii).

Stressing that he is not a creationist apologist but a journalist (p. xiii), Sewell details the enormous harm Darwin has caused society and he carefully documents his conclusions with 25 pages of notes and references, almost ten percent of the book. The references and quotes alone are worth the price of the book.

## Accessible review of the effects of Darwinism on society

Many scholarly tomes cover the influence of Darwinism on society, but few resources in this area are as readable, hard hitting, well documented, and as effective in making the connection of eugenics to Darwin. Sewell documents that there is “no doubt about the lineage of eugenics itself”, noting that in the “years leading up to the First World War, the eugenics movement looked like a Darwin family business.” Specifically,

“Darwin's son Leonard replaced his cousin Galton as chairman of the national Eugenics Society in 1911. In the same year an offshoot of the society was formed in Cambridge. Among its leading members were three more of Charles Darwin's sons, Horace, Francis and George. The group's treasurer was a young economics lecturer at the university, John Maynard Keynes, whose younger brother Geoffrey would later marry Darwin's granddaughter Margaret. Meanwhile, Keynes's mother, Florence, and Horace Darwin's daughter Ruth, sat together on the committee of the



Cambridge Association for the Care of the Feeble-Minded ... a front organization for eugenics” (p. 54).

Sewell bends over backward to be fair and not misrepresent Darwin, but he also tells the whole story, a story often sorely neglected in the literature on evolution. The picture Sewell documents is not pretty—but both sad and tragic. In support of his conclusions, and to help readers understand where they came from, Sewell allows the words of leading scientists, such as Ernst Haeckel and Charles Darwin, whose racist ideas were crystal clear in their writings, to speak for themselves.

To set the theme of the book, Sewell quoted from Daniel Dennett who wrote that evolution is a “universal acid that dissolves every ethical and moral system it encounters” (p. 8). The extent that evolution is a universal acid that affects, and even explains, societal decay, is covered in detail. Sewell shows that, for some, evolution even explains and justifies rape. Evolution teaches that nature selects those organisms that leave more offspring, and the more sexually aggressive a person is, the more offspring he will usually produce, leaving the genes

that cause sexual aggression to a disproportionate number of offspring. As a result, this trait will become more common in the population.

Sewell adds that although Richard Dawkins has convinced many persons that he has a “slam-dunk case for giving up any search for meaning, purpose or direction in human affairs” (p. 8), Sewell is not so confident of the validity of Dawkins’ case. Furthermore, Sewell notes that evolution does give meaning and direction to its academic believers, but this meaning and direction is now recognized, for example, as strongly influencing the acceptance of the now infamous eugenics movement:

“Eugenics might have remained where it began, on the margins of British political life, something to be discussed in draughty temperance halls at meetings of the Rationalist Association (for the Darwinist/atheist axis had already become well established). However, unlike many other esoteric theories of the day ... the eugenics movement could count on the support not only of cranks, but of Cambridge academics, fellows of the Royal Society and large numbers of the medical profession itself” (p. 55).

He then concludes:

“Together they were capable of launching what would prove to be an impressive political lobbying campaign. In a remarkably short space of time, the vocabulary and basic principles of eugenics spread through the middle class, becoming almost the rule rather than the exception. This rapid mainstreaming of what began as a quirky set of ideas is rather like the way that the environmental movement developed in our own times” (p. 55).

### The case of Ota Benga

Sewell opens chapter one with the story of Ota Benga, the pygmy put on display in the Bronx Zoo in a locked cage with an orangutan named Dohung. They were about the same height and even their grin was similar. No doubt many of the more than 40,000 visitors who saw the

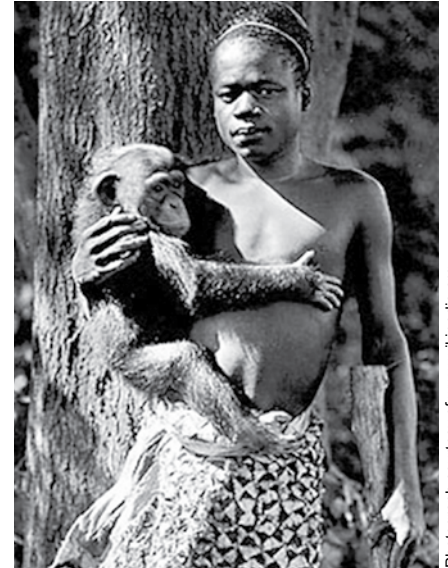
exhibit on the second day alone got the point. The secretary of the zoo was an “enthusiastic champion of eugenics”, and he hoped to use the display to proselytize his evolution views to the public (p. 3). The display caused the crowd to ask questions such as “Was Ota Benga a monkey or a man?” (p. 1). The zookeeper answered that Ota was “a transitional form between man and monkey, the missing link.” Ota Benga, in other words, was transitional animal between a monkey and a man, the “famously elusive missing link” (p. 1).

Some African American Baptist pastors, though, were not very impressed either with the display or with evolution (p. 3). Actually, about the only opposition to the display was from African American ministers who did not believe in evolution (p. 6). The evolutionists defended the display by noting that evolution is taught in the school textbooks and “is no more debatable than the multiplication table” (p. 6).

Furthermore, one supporter of the exhibit, Heney Fairfield Osborn “one of the most esteemed American anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century, seemingly could not bring himself to include the African as a member of the human race at all” (p. 19). Sewell adds that a century later, American Vice-Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin took the side of the African American ministers on evolution, and, he concludes, this was a significant factor as to why she was treated so poorly by the left, the media, and academia (pp. 6–7).

The exhibit designed to teach the “public that the human is just another primate” (p. 12) was repeated almost a century later when 3 men and 5 women put on “fig leaves” and were put in a cage to frolic with apes “to demonstrate the basic nature of man” is an animal, and that we are “not that special” (p. 12). Sewell then asks, “have things changed much?”

Although the once almost universal conclusion by scientists “that black people were closer in the evolutionary scale to apes than white



Photograph courtesy of www.wikipedia.org

**Figure 1.** Evolutionary belief was the motivation for forcing Ota Benga into a monkey’s cage as an exhibit in a zoo. Photo taken in the fall of 1906.

people is seen by scientists today as a ghastly mistake,” scientists “are not taking any responsibility for [this mistake] ... yet its traces linger in the minds of millions, infecting attitudes to race everywhere” (p. 20). As evidence, Sewell noted that Nobel Laureate James Watson “explained his gloomy prognosis for Africa’s social and economic development” by arguing that we could not expect that “the intellectual capacities of people graphically separated in their evolution should prove to have evolved identically” to the level of the higher evolved technologically sophisticated whites (p. 19).

Sewell documents the jump of eugenics from theory to politics and control, by noting that

“... the eugenics movement required an expansion of state agencies and an expansion of their scope for prying into—and ultimately directing—the lives of the poor. ‘A system will also be established for the examination of the family history of all those placed on the register as being unquestionably mentally abnormal,’ said Leonard Darwin, ‘especially as regards the criminality, insanity, ill health and

pauperism of their relatives ... If all this were done, it can hardly be doubted that many strains would be discovered which no one could deny ought to be made to die out in the interests of the nation [in what in Germany became a short step to the holocaust]” (pp. 54–55).

A theme Sewell stressed in much of the book is that eugenics is not dead, just more subtle today. Sewell gives several examples to support his conclusion that the thinking behind eugenics is still very much with us today. One example he noted was the case of the self-proclaimed Social Darwinist Pekka-Eric Auvinen, a Finnish high school student who murdered eight people, including the school’s head teacher, on November 7, 2007. Auvinen was concerned that humans had slowed, or even reversed, evolution in Western society (p. 45). He wrote on his blog that the “stupid, weak-minded people reproduce ... faster than intelligent, strong-minded” persons like himself (p. 45).

Sewell noted that Auvinen carefully had thought through the philosophical implications of Darwin’s argument and concluded that humans, like every other animal, have no special value because life was without purpose, the result of a long process of survival-of-the-fittest evolution (p. 45). His special plea was he hoped his actions would result in the role of social Darwinism to be taken more seriously.

Auvinen stressed that movies, computer games, TV, and music were not the source of his motivation to murder those he judged as inferior persons, but rather Darwinism (p. 46). He chose his victims with care, “trying to weed out those who were, in his judgment, the unfit” (p. 46). To those of us not intoxicated with Darwinism, he was psychotic or, at the least simply an evil, misguided person.

### **An example: the American Columbine killers**

The Columbine killers—“two amateur social Darwinists”—made

similar arguments as Auvinen (p. 47). Columbine killer Eric Harris wore a “Natural Selection” T-shirt on the day of the massacre, and both killers made remarks on video about helping natural selection along by eliminating the weak (p. 47). They also made frequent references to evolution, all ignored by the press.

These modern examples show how easily Darwin’s writings can lead to, or at least influence, very disturbed ways of thinking and behaving. Their behavior is, on a small scale, not unlike the altitudes once common in Nazi Germany. The explosion in evolutionary psychology that attempts to describe every type of human behavior including religion, sexual orientation, occupational interests, and work ethic as genetically determined is another example.

Sewell also discusses issues such as the use of abortion to produce fitter humans and government programs to control medical decisions based on modern soft eugenics. In short, he does not feel comfortable with leaving such judgments to scientists or politicians. He also questions the extent of practical benefits for humanity that the theory of evolution has contributed, concluding that Darwinism hardly occupies a high position compared to the discovery of DNA and antibiotics, the invention of the transistor and MRI, or even the World Wide Web revolution. Sewell then argues that Darwinism has been put at the pinnacle of media and scientific esteem, not by scientific fact or history, but rather by a vast expensive public relations program paid for by tax dollars.

### **Conclusions**

Sewell’s overriding concern, as the book documents, is that Darwinism has caused dehumanization and has misled us in the past and in the present—and will likely continue to do so in the future as a result of the genetics revolution and the ability to select fitter children by techniques such as DNA sequencing and *in vitro* fertilization.

The example he gives is a woman who aborted her first two children due to fact that the sonogram of each showed an extra finger. The doctor in the case investigated and found the mother had the same condition, which in her case was dealt with by a fairly minor operation. Yet the doctor reported that she chose to abort two children who had inherited her minor flaw, one that had few, if any, adverse consequences in her life.

### **References**

1. Dennett, D.C., *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.