



Published 2008

John West, Darwin Day in America, and Benjamin Wiker, Darwinism in America

Review by Jeffrey Stueber

In my online essay critiquing Christopher Hitchens' book *God is not Great 1* I pointed out that he had ignored the impact of evolutionist theory on Western society while searching diligently for any impact religion may have had on any of the tragedies of Western civilization so as to blame it rather than evolution. How ironic it is that after I had finished that essay I was alerted to West's book in a Conservative Book club flier and immediately bought it. *Darwin Day* is richly documented and well researched and serves to buttress Hitchens' reluctance to give Darwinism its due credit for changes in our culture.

Those alien to these issues will be surprised at how prevalent evolutionism was before Darwin. West traces these ideas through Greece, reflecting on the works of Epicurus and here one will find Wiker also useful. Epicurus believed there were two great disturbances that trouble us, the first that gods can influence us directly or cause things in the sky (moon, sun, lightning) to do so and the second the belief in the afterlife. The purpose of natural science is to remove these troubles and Epicurus relied on the atomistic theories of Democritus that all things were reducible to the movement of individual particles to do so. Wiker makes a clever point at this juncture: microscopes were not invented by this time and so none of Epicurus' arguments were based on direct evidence. They were biased presuppositions just as Darwinian presuppositions exist now. Epicurus did not believe in an immaterial soul, either, and allowed for the existence of free will only by suggesting that sometimes the collisions of particles are not predetermined.

Christianity put an end to such ideas, but they always remained in back of the minds of numerous intellectuals. Here John Chancellor and Ronald Clark speak plainly.

The *Origin of the Species* was the most important book of the nineteenth century. Its achievement was to teach people to believe in evolution. Not only the general public but also many naturalists were horrified by the theories, or by the implications of the theories, which Darwin propounded. He was, they said, trying to dethrone man from his proper place in the scheme of things and to challenge the incontrovertible truths of the Bible. He had dared to question the view that the human race was a unique and lofty species, created by God in His own image and quite independent of every other form of living thing. He suggested instead that species . . . had started as quite different creatures from those we see today: that they had undergone all sorts of subtle changes over the years, thus giving rise, by slow and natural processes, to new species. **2**

Today, it is impossible to appreciate the changes Darwin wrought in man's view of the universe, and of his own place in it, without understanding the basically different outlook of the 1830s. The belief on which all rested was that the biblical story of the Creation was history rather than

symbolic mythology. . . . Then came Darwin. Many years later, proof of Einstein's general theory of relativity had, as the *Times* put it, dealt with the fabric of the universe. Darwin was cartooned as the man tearing apart the fabric of belief. **3**

West's chapters on the impact of evolution on the legal profession are scary. Gradually our culture evolved (pun intended) from the acceptance people have free will and need to be judged accordingly to the belief people are helpless victims of material causes and hence not accountable. West says "by the end of the nineteenth century, American scholars were talking with excitement about the 'new school of criminal anthropology,' which sought to use science to identify the causes of crime." Just recently Duke University professor of psychology John Staddon noted that "nearly all psychologists believe that behavior is completely determined by heredity and environment." Often these ideas reached comedic proportions. Freudian physician David Abrahamsen tried to explain why a teenage boy frequently stole cars and eventually, through a long strain of arguments, concluded that the car represented his mother and his theft was his attempt to find a substitute.

This reasoning makes perfect sense in a Darwinian world. If we are merely programmed to act by our genes and environment, then free choice is a myth. Hence, we can cure people of their bad choices by finding what causes them to act like they do. When we change their environment they will act correctly. This is the underlying religious nature of humanism: rather than preaching to someone the sinfulness of their act and their need to obey God, we can cure them of their maladaptive actions by altering their environment so they act correctly in the future. Of course there is a lethal contradiction in this reasoning: if criminals are conditioned to act as they do without the ability to change, then it is logically possible that we only believe this because our brains have been programmed by environment or heredity. Hence, we have no rational reason to suppose we have come to these ideas by rational thought and hence cannot necessarily believe they are true.

West has interesting chapters on evolution's impact on eugenics and here casual observers will be surprised at how much American biologists had in common with Adolf Hitler. Eugenecists presupposed that the poor and other defective individuals ought to be sterilized or kept from reproducing and, West says, "The American eugenics movement was so well established by 1912 that it was drawing favorable notices in Europe." In July of that year American eugenecists played a starring role in the first International Eugenics Congress in London and Professor Ruggeri from Italy recognized American eugenecists by saying "thanks to recent researches in the United States, it was now certain that the races of man acted in exactly the same way as the races of animals." Here eugenecists conflicted with the traditional view of religious social welfare workers who stressed the poor could empower themselves rather than claiming the poor were prisoners of their biology.

Of course followers of Marx and Communism quickly seized upon such theories as did Nazi Germany. Hitler told one of his colleagues that he had "studied with great interest the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock." Hitler took this idea to its fruition and several Americans were jealous of the Nazi success because, as West says, "it was much more comprehensive than patchwork American efforts." However, American eugenics died while Nazi efforts flourished, but they too died because of what we found once we unearthed the horrors of the Nazi war machine.

Evolution has influenced a hedonistic culture and Wiker traces its impact through three individuals - Ernst Haeckel, Margaret Sanger, and Alfred Kinsey - and here Wiker is almost as well documented as I would have liked him to be. Wiker reproduces a quote from Haeckel that insinuates there are different races of man, some nearer to mammals (apes and dogs) than civilized Europeans, and we must assign a different value to their lives. Such an opinion today would be considered politically incorrect, but in Darwin's day it was in vogue and Darwin himself relied heavily on Haeckel's work (if that fact is not clear from reading Darwin's *Descent*). Hundreds of thousands of Haeckel's books were sold in Germany and he was constantly cited in texts about racial and social biology which were used to disseminate eugenics and Nazi ideas. Sanger likewise believed only the racially fit should reproduce and Wiker believes she relied heavily on Darwin. Sanger comes across as a sex-obsessed Darwinist when saying "Through sex, mankind may attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, which will light up the only path to an earthly paradise." Kinsey also embraced eugenics, but sexuality became his hobby. Kinsey assumed that nature was amoral and that deviations from present day sexual practices were not deviations from the norm but a return to the old natural order of life.

When reading these books, one comes to the conclusion that evolution has been embraced by intellectuals waiting to find an excuse either to fail to abide by conservative Christian sexual dictates or waiting to find a reason to engage in totalitarian race-perfecting activities. The desire for Darwinism gives many a reason to engage in intellectual censorship, and West has examples of this in a chapter as well. Here we reflect back on Wiker early in his discussion of Epicurus.

One of the chief difficulties in advancing intelligent design arguments in the public square is that this square is guarded by those who are trained to believe that there are only the two stark alternatives: materialist science (which defines the very meaning of rationality) or immaterialist irrationalism. That there are rational arguments for the existence of an intelligent cause is simply ruled out by declaring if the argument is not materialist, then it must be irrational (or, more kindly, "theological").

I recommend these books if you want to know how evolution has impacted our societies. I recommend Hitchens get these books as well. *LSI*

References

1. Webpages, charter.net/jeffstueber/hitchens.htm.
2. John Chancellor, *Charles Darwin* (New York, Taplinger, 1973), p. 13.
3. Ronald Clark, *The Survival of Charles Darwin: The Biography of a Man and an Idea* (New York, 1984), p. 5.