

A Social Darwinian Approach to the Relationship between Economics and Ethics*

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between economics and ethics from the viewpoint of Social Darwinism principles while also aiming to explore the existence of certain principles regarding this theory and its view of evolutionary ethics on the philosophical grounds of the prevailing economic system of the modern world, capitalism. The most notable principle of Social Darwinism in economic activities has been that of "leave alone," expressed as "laissez faire," which has played an important role in the development and proliferation of the free market concept. Also, the assertion of social evolution in that only the strongest and fittest can survive in all areas corresponds to capitalism in the economic domain because capitalism has been described as a system in which economic power is emphasized and increasingly higher levels of consumption are required to protect this power. This has led, and continues to lead, to the creation of previously non-existent needs apart from vital needs while at the same time increasing consumption to satisfy these needs. Yet, encouraging such high levels of consumption has in reality served to beget a policy of exploitation, apparent in several entities, among these being man, nature, resources, and time. In this light, the entire network of these relationships has been explored through a descriptive account in this study.

Key Words

Capitalism, Ethics, Exploitation, Free Market, Social Darwinism.

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The relationship between Economics and Ethics consists just as much of a review of the methods used and the goals sought in economic activities as it consists of the results of the philosophical theory constituting the foundation of these methods and goals. Based on this description, the current study explores the economics-ethics relationship from the viewpoint of Social Darwinism principles in which it begins by briefly mentioning the theory of social evolution, the socio-cultural conditions introducing it, and the views nurtured by this theory. In other words, the first aim of the present study is to detail the concept of economics as asserted by evolutionary ethics. Thus, this study reveals the nature of the relationship between Social Darwinism and economic theory as well as the evolutionary view that has allowed for this relationship to take form and find credence. After this introduction, the study discusses the present footprints of this concept and its consequential moral problems as well as the exploitative policies imposed over socio-cultural life, which themselves are active in affecting practice, albeit indirectly. At the same time, the reason to draw attention to the existence of such a relationship is that it is Social Darwinism which has provided the theoretical grounds that have shaped and bestowed capitalism its philosophical strength and very basis of existence. Despite the existence of such a relationship, no meticulous research has yet to be performed, and, to the extent it can be seen, there exists no academic study in Turkey focusing on this relationship apart from a limited number of references in some articles on modern economics discussing the relationship between Social Darwinism and its ethical concept as well as modern economics theory and the capitalist system.

The relationship between economics and the theory in question has been explored more on the basis of liberalism. For example, a study by Tosun (2010) focuses on Social Darwinism and the free market concept in terms the State being denied interference in either the economic or social domains. Again, an article by Güzel and Özel (2011) performs a concept analysis exploring the different meanings assumed by the concept of evolution in the economic and social domain over the course of history, focusing on the issues raised by such differences. Yalçıntaş's article (2010), however, has focused directly on the relationship between economics and the theory of evolution, describing, through detailed graphs, both this relationship and how it has become that

evolutionary economics is currently a subject of research in Turkey. Moreover, Yalçıntaş's study only explored this issue from the viewpoint of the standards owned by economics and within the limits of economic terminology, rather than being a moral or philosophical review.

When Social Darwinism is discussed, it is Herbert Spencer and his view that come to mind. Spencer's view is that human moral behavior, much like his own biology, are also biological. Spencer added a new dimension to the theory of evolution by asserting that the law of evolution should be applied to all aspects of both organic and inorganic life. His views on evolution have been dubbed Social Darwinism (Degler, 1991, p. 11), and the advocates of evolutionary ethics Social Darwinists (Ruse, 1999, p. 98). From this perspective, Social Darwinism is described as a philosophy in which it is claimed that the evolutionist principle of survival applies to all domains, including economic life, in the form of fitting into the environment/conditions. Such a presupposition then leads to one holding the perspective that just as natural law allows only the fittest to survive, so does it determine and organize economic life. Hence, one of the most integral ideas that allows such a relationship to be perceived is the view that it is the basic instinct of selfism that determines economic life (Koslowski, 2001, p. 1).

The Intellectual Foundations of Social Darwinism

The views of Adam Smith on economy cannot be overlooked in the formation of Social Darwinism philosophy. Smith, by asserting that selfishness and greed are inherent in human nature, is noted to have laid an intellectual foundation for "the struggle to survive" in evolution theory. Being a moral philosopher, Smith believes that moral sentiments play a role in maintaining the buoyancy of economic competition and the market while also conveying his views about economy from a moral perspective (pls. see Haakonssen, 2002; Richards, 1999; Smith, 1761, p. 113). Accordingly, the thinker's above views influenced both Darwin and Spencer, thus having an impact on the configuration of the theory of evolutionary ethics.

On the other hand, Thomas Malthus' views on the relationship between population and food also attracted Spencer's attention. Malthus' assertions, which influenced both Darwin and Spencer, are that the population experiences rapid growth despite a limited food supply and, as a result of the unbalance caused thereby, those who cannot access food perish (Darwin, 1996, p. 56; Wright, 2002, p. 125). The main tendency of English society, in which Spencer's intellectual world was shaped, was in harmony with the principles of evolution theory because free competition and struggle existed within both the English state and society, a reality which nurtured such evolutionary theories (Sorokin, 1963, p. 92). Thus, the fact that the main corpus of theories on evolutionary ethics sprouted in a capitalist environment where intense competition prevailed is important for one wishing to establish a relationship between economics and evolutionary ethics. For, it is in such capitalist environments, in which competition is experienced to its fullest extent, that the thinking that one must struggle for his very survival in an economic race due to his perceived reality in which some companies and factories increase their business and profits (and therefore livelihood) while others simply perish. In this regard, it can be said that if he had lived in a stable society instead of a society in which economic competition prevailed, he would probably have not presupposed such views as natural selection and struggle for survival (Taslaman, 2007, 2009).

The Industrial Revolution, which was an important step in the development of liberal thinking, reinforced man's belief that he is superior over nature, and consequently the free individual initiative. Again, in this fast industrialization setting, with the proliferation of capitalist ideas, the notion of free initiative, and its entailment of private property, the liberal philosophical approach penetrated into economic activities (Çetin, 2002, pp. 88-89). The most obvious characteristic of the era in question is that the competition and progress of ideas prevailed over both the political and economic policies. Thus, according to Spencer, progress is a law of nature which will unavoidably occur (Devillers & Tintant, 2009, p. 237; Spencer, 1868, p. 1-60). On the other hand, recognition of progress as a natural law makes its survival dependent on struggle. For the prevailing law in nature is the struggle for survival, and only those who win this struggle by adapting to the new conditions can progress (Ruse, 2006, p. 204).

The development of modern industry and the consequential emergence of world markets have led to recognition of the struggle for survival to be held as a general principle in the capitalist concept of production (Hawkins, 1997, p. 152). Following the massacre caused by the civil war in England in the 17th century, people were exceedingly exposed to the most unfavorable effects of struggle and strife. This unfavorable phenomenon caused them to consider Spencer's messages such as the struggle to be the "fittest" and, as a consequence, to progress. For example, the businessmen claimed that the actual reason for their success was not the incompetence or lack of ability on the part of their competitors, but their own efforts (Ruse, 1998, p. 74). Thus, it was claimed that mankind found its most powerful support in Spencer's thinking in its quest to acquire both political and economic power (Bannister, 1979, p. 3; Hall, 2011, p. 412; Wright, 2002).

The bourgeoisie that rose in tandem with the industrial evolution built their economic and social constructs based on the principle that the strong would survive in a free environment. Therefore, it objected to the state's interference in economic life; instead desiring that everything in economic life be left to its natural course (*laissez-faire*) and that those who worked should win while those who failed to demonstrate adequate effort and work should perish (competitive capitalism) (Rank, 1941, p. 33). This is as much of an indicator of how the economic discourses changed as it is to the role played by the concept of evolution in effecting this change (Himmelfrab, 1970, p. 316). Accordingly, it was claimed that the fact that those who made wealth over the public thereby also proving their superiority over the public in the early 20th century increased the number of advocates of Social Darwinism (O'Connor & Faille, 2000, p. 185).

From this viewpoint, it may be said that one important principle of the relationship between evolutionary ethics and economics is the concept of "*laissez faire*," which can be defined as "leave alone." This is described as the name given to the reflection of the liberal philosophical thought in economy, or as the advocacy of freedom in economic life. Liberalism philosophically both emphasizes the priority and freedom of an individual and demands that individual freely engage in the economic domain and that his initiatives not be hindered by either the state or society (Çetin, 2002, p. 88).

The advocates of “laissez faire” objected to the prevention of the natural functioning of the economy by the state or any other power (Tosun, 2010, p. 88). For this reason, industrial and financial circles received considerable support from their views in their newfound ability to increase their wealth and position in the market. In other words, the wealthy and successful found a philosophical justification to legitimize the method they followed and the wealth they made (Dobson, 2007, pp. 192-193). Actually, this is a natural outcome of using philosophical views for ideological purposes. Therefore, the partnership that was to be established by the ideology of selfism through the support of philosophical views, as well as through the support of those in positions of power (Marangos, 2013, p. 33), became a valid principle in the Social Darwinian concept of economy. Thus, according to Spencer, pure altruism which will be solely benefit someone else is dangerous as well as causes lazy and useless people to increase, which means the degeneration of the society. Therefore, Spencer held that moral principles had to comply with the laws of nature (Spencer, 1978, pp. 259-260), claiming that offering a helping hand to every single individual was an important obstacle to social development (Spencer, 1865, p. 354). As such, he stated that the state should abandon helping the poor and the weak so as to not prevent the natural selection process (O'Connor & Faille, 2000, p. 185).

The Two Major Principles of Social Darwinism Affecting Economy: Individual Power and the Free Market Concept

This philosophy claims that economic laws must comply with the laws of nature and also continues to guide today's economy thereby nurturing selfish feelings in individuals and legitimizing the belief that the conditions that enable the economic survival of the powerful comply with these ethics. On the other hand, the fact that this system had no visible alternative, not to mention that it was considered inevitable and desirable, caused a number of ethical problems. The most notable being individual power and free market concepts, as emphasized at the beginning of this article (Bishop, 2000b, p. ix). Although forming symbiotic relations and cooperation are unavoidable outcomes of

social evolution prompting the powerful to help the weak, the actual priority has been construed to be protecting individual power and wealth. Those aware of this situation have noted that although Social Darwinism and the principle of “laissez faire” involuntarily opened a door to helping one other and doing good within the context of individual freedom, it lacked an intellectual foundation to support that such behavior was actually voluntary (Frey, 2009, p. 93).

It was also claimed that Spencer advocated “laissez faire” as the best system as an indication of his basic claim of “survival of the fittest” (Kasper, 2002, p. 1, 27). It may be said that, as result of the thinker’s recognition of the failure of the individual to fit into the existing conditions as the cause of all evils, and of the success of the individual in fitting into the conditions as the cause of goods (İbanoğlu, 2004, p. 86; Spencer, 1865, p. 77), it was made it easier to recognize fitting into, and demonstrating the effort toward, a system more suitable to increase economic power as a morally good act.

Thus, evolutionist individual struggle for survival in natural life gave way to the money struggle; that is, the accumulation of money and property in economic life (DeVoon, 2007, p. 98). It was explicitly stated that the competitive economy of the USA, which can be described as the center of the capitalist economy, was nurtured by the “survival of the fittest” principle (O’Connor & Faille, 2000, p. 185). Again, this concept served the monopolization of capital while also inducing the struggle not only to define social order with its own concepts, but also to establish these concepts in society’s psyche (McDonough, 1994, p. 113). The relationship between capitalism and social evolution can be easily understood from the way it is defined through utility (Gordon, Edwards, & Reich, 1994, p. 11) and the debate regarding this system from the viewpoint of the moral legitimacy of individual power and the free market (Bishop, 2000, p. 40).

“Exploitation Mentality” and Social Darwinism

Another reflection of the effect that Social Darwinian morality has exerted on the theory and practice of economics can be seen in the exploitive policies experienced in every socio-cultural domain. The meaning of the term economy/

economics, in view of its etymology (Gül, 2010, p. 28; Sami, 1900, p. 141), allows it to form a relationship with a mentality both supporting and justifying exploitation. Although there are several facets to this exploitation, where economics is concerned, the most notable are two: (1) the physical and mental exploitation of humanity, primarily in working life, regardless of gender or age and (2) the exploitation of countries' economic and natural resources/sources of wealth (including nature itself); both forms of exploitation performed by a few powerful countries (Lenin, 2010). Both the underground and aboveground treasures, and certainly the people of primarily Eastern and African countries weak politically, militarily, and financially, are under serious threat in this respect. Also, those causing these threats are the Western powers who hold the belief that they are the last link in man's evolution, and therefore, are superior (Ruse, 2009, p. 213).

Moreover, the relationship between exploitation of time and capitalism can be seen in the insensible consumption of time by millions of individuals spending their time on shows and entertainment programs, computer games, etc. released to the market for entertainment and relaxation, not to mention the billions of profits acquired by doing so. As partially mentioned above, the most important moral harm caused by the capitalist concept based on the unilateral acquisition of profit is that those who desire to be economically powerful accept any means as licit toward this desire, thinking only of their own interests.

The Monopolization of Power and the Deepening of Economic Inequality

This economic inequality attributed to Social Darwinism which is seen as the natural consequence of Spencer's "Survival of the Fittest" principle and social struggle, has been named the "religion of inequality." In other words, the economic and cultural differences between social classes began to be regarded as natural and unchangeable, just like blind religious dogma. It was even expressed that this very way of thinking formed within the frame of Spencer's personal view supported the growth of industrialization in England and the US, strengthened the ideology behind urbanization, and purported

the idea that democracy and freedom were to be sacrificed for the good of this capitalist mechanism (Thompson, 2007, p. 52, 101, 104). It was stated that alternative ideas allowing the State to impose sanctions through laws on those who acquired unjust profit led to a decrease of proponents of this thinking in the US (Dobson, 2007, p. 93). Calling attention to the fact that economic life is built upon the “laissez faire” philosophy would cause considerable damages both to the American economy -a country regarded as a super power in all respects and on the global economy and who has the power to influence these ideas (Kuttner, 1991, p. 3).

The holders of economic power who do not want to maintain their position therefore have the power to create pressure on the political powers that be (Copp, 2000, pp. 92-94). Therefore, it may be said that those who continue their existence in this “free initiative” capitalist economic system are “the fittest,” as asserted as by Social Darwinism (Holt-Jensen, 2009, p. 231).

Conclusion

Although the capitalist economic system is believed to be limited only to the economy, it also has affected and changed the social and political order as well as ethical conceptions. The values of the “modern” world, whose entire base of existence is founded on superiority due to economic wealth, were all defined according to this system. As described above, looking into the democracy-capitalism relationship makes the psychological and military intervention of Western countries in various Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries in the name of bringing democracy a prerequisite for the continuity of the capitalist system and its entailing exploitation.

The most notable characteristics of the free market or liberal economy, as summarized as “laissez faire” are as follows: (1) Concentrating economic wealth into a few hands; (2) an increased number of powerful entities continuing to gain more power, (3) an increased number of working men unable to receive just compensation for their work thus increasing the amount of unjust and unfairly attained wealth; and (4) a consequential increase of those who

subscribe to selfishness. As a result of extorting the rights of the powerless by a powerful elite which thrives to increase its material wealth; of desiring to attain wealth by using the existing powers in a way to harm the public; of using individual power and means primarily and solely for personal interests; thus ignoring the needy, the economic growth increases; but, humane feelings die, everything, even moral values such as “good, right” are measured with material value, consciences keep silent, and therefore, criteria defining human-moral values change.

It is also possible to mention a number of benefits of the oft-criticized free market and capitalist economy supported by Social Darwinism. Thus, capitalism is regarded as important in terms of economic development as it increases and diversifies production by encouraging competition and individual initiative. Again, struggle and competition allow individuals to make better use of, and therefore further enhance, their inherent skills and capacity. It is possible to minimize the harms caused by the said benefits by taking certain measures. Besides these measures, which fall under the providence of the political system, people’s awareness about how and for what purposes they should use their inherent skills should be raised. In other words, morality should be involved in the process.

Thus, resources used by those who are better-equipped in terms of intelligence and skills actually belong to the entire society, and therefore, other beneficiaries of the capital should also receive what they deserve, though not as much as those who work to increase capital. Besides, it may also be questioned how this can be realized in a free market system based on competition. Certainly, it is an issue that should be contemplated and solved by economists and experts in the field.

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