

# The public be damned

By Bill Kilpatrick

Social Darwinism is the idea that takes the teachings of evolution by Charles Darwin, mainly 'the survival of the fittest,' and applies them to human society, economics, and human interactions. It is a 'theory' that has thoroughly been debunked as deeply racist, but in certain circles it in fact never went away. Those circles are the circles of the uber rich. Currently it is making a come back in mainstream society. Brought back by none other than Donald Trump, who is reaching way back in history for ideas to justify his and others racism, misogyny, and lust for power. His comments at a rally in 2023, where he sounded more like Adolf Hitler, where he preached that 'They're [immigrants] poisoning the blood of our country.' The fact that these ideas exist is disturbing enough, but it's even more disturbing to note that there are many people in power who very much adhere to these harmful and destructive beliefs.

The main purveyors of this idea were two men named Herbet Spencer and William Graham Sumner who were writing in the 1800s. Spencer justified his beliefs stating 'I am simply carrying out the views of Mr. Darwin in their applications to the human race.' And Sumner famously said, 'The millionaires are a product of natural selection.' Economist John Kenneth Galbraith says that in the United States at the time they were preaching and writing about these ideas many felt that, 'Those ideas couldn't, in fact, have been more wonderful.'

According to Galbraith who was writing in the 1970s, 'No one should imagine that Spencer and Sumner are relics purely of the past. They still restrain the hand of the well-to-do individual when he is approached by a beggar.' And he's right. Some 30 plus years later, following the economic crash of 2008 a man named John Steel Gordon wrote an article in Forbes magazine about the Cadillac car company in the 1930s, and here's how he started his article, 'Although this will come as a surprise to most academic economists, economics is one of the biological sciences. Free markets operate according to the rules that govern life itself, rules that are not always fair. And just as in a biological ecosystem, the fit (and the lucky) survive the test of the market; the rest do not.' Gordon clearly ignored the massive bailouts that were required to keep those markets 'operating according to the rules that govern life itself.' He also downplayed the role of luck in the making of fortunes.

In his 1977 book, *An Age of Uncertainty*, a fitting title given the current state of the world, Galbraith says, 'Of all the classes the rich are the most noticed and the least studied. So it was, and so it largely remains. In the last century compassionate scholars looked thoughtfully into the conditions of the poor. Why were they poor? Was it sloth? Lack of ambition? Exploitation by cruel employers? Uncontrolled reproduction? The natural order of things? All of these explanations, especially the last, had their adherents. And the way of life of the poor was also studied. How were they housed? What did they eat? What were their amusements? With a delicacy appropriate to the age, how did they breed? The rich, by contrast, were exempt from such attention.'

As we see social Darwinism and it's accompanying lack of compassion for their fellow beings remerging, we need to ask what drives people like Trump or Elon Musk or Hungary's Viktor Orban. In his book Galbraith looks at some wealthy figures from the past whose comments can now be heard again at the highest levels of government. Galbraith looks at the railroad barons stating that 'nothing in the last century, and nothing so far in this century, so altered the fortunes of so many people so suddenly and the American or Canadian railways.' Galbraith died in 2006, but he lived long enough to see the internet begin to alter the fortunes of people on a scale previously unimagined.

In the 1800s people like Jay Gould, Jim Fisk, and Cornelius Vanderbilt, had one goal: make as much money as possible in anyway possible and no one, not the law and not the government and especially not the public, would get in their way. As Galbraith says, 'Vanderbilt's commitment was to robbing the public,' adding that 'The enduring contribution of his family to spoken literature was the expression 'The public be damned.' One need not look far to see these sentiments playing out in the United States with Musk's department of government efficiency finding ways to cut government services in order to give the uber wealthy yet another tax break. In Canada we are witnessing an erosion of our public healthcare system as private companies swoop in to fill the gaps as government after government continues to cut funding. The same can be said for education among other public enterprises such as Hydro One and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario.

Chris Hedges, in an article for TruthDig had this to say about what happens when the rich take over the levers of government power. Political theorists, from Aristotle and Karl Marx to Sheldon Wolin, have warned against the rule of the uber-rich. Once the uber-rich take over, Aristotle writes, the only options are tyranny and revolution. They do not know how to nurture or build. They know only how to feed their bottomless greed. It's a funny thing about the uber-rich: No matter how many billions they possess, they never have enough. They are the hungry ghosts of Buddhism. They seek, through the accumulation of power, money and objects, an unachievable happiness. This life of endless desire often ends badly, with the uber-rich estranged from their spouses and children, bereft of genuine friends. And when they are gone, as Charles Dickens wrote in A Christmas Carol, most people are glad to be rid of them.

Probably the most disturbing thing about the uber-greedy is that they will never stop. They will keep robbing from the public purse at our expense, as long as we let them that is. As Galbraith notes, "People of privilege will always risk their complete destruction rather than surrender any material part of their advantage. Intellectual myopia, often called stupidity, is no doubt a reason. But the privileged feel also that their privileges, however egregious they may seem to others, are a solemn, basic, God-given right. The sensitivity of the poor to injustice is a trivial thing compared with that of the rich. So, it was in the Ancien Régime. When reform from the top became impossible, revolution from the bottom became inevitable."

As we witness the dismantling and looting of the United States government we need to realize that we are not immune from the same mentality and the same thinking that is at work south of the border. We need to bring back the idea that our government is not the enemy and we need to realize that when the power of government is wielded properly with the public good in mind it protects us from the modern robber barons, who only intend to rob us blind. If we want a viable future for our children perhaps it's time to say "the rich be damned."