

Inequality and Reform

“The philosophy called Social Darwinism grew out of the English naturalist Charles Darwin’s theory of biological evolution. In his book *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, Darwin described his observations that some individuals of a species flourish and pass their traits along to the next generation, while others do not. He explained that a process of ‘natural selection’ weeded out less-suited individuals and enabled the best-adapted to survive.

The English philosopher Herbert Spencer used Darwin’s biological theories to explain the evolution of human society. Soon, economists found in Social Darwinism a way to justify the doctrine of laissez faire (a French term meaning “let them do [businesses] as they please”). According to this doctrine, the marketplace should not be regulated. William G. Sumner, a political science professor at Yale University, promoted the theory that success and failure in business were governed by natural law and that no one had the right to intervene.

The premise of the survival and success of the most capable naturally made sense to the 4,000 millionaires who had emerged since the Civil War. Because the theory supported the notion of individual responsibility and blame, it also appealed to the Protestant work ethic of many Americans. According to Social Darwinism, riches were a sign of God’s favor, and therefore the poor must be lazy or inferior people who deserved their lot in life.

Although some business owners endorsed the ‘natural law’ in theory, in practice most entrepreneurs did everything they could to control the competition that threatened the growth of their business empires.” ~ *The Americans*

Statement A: “The best way to economic recovery is to subsidize industry so that it will hire more workers and expand production.”

Statement B: “If jobs are not available, the government must create jobs for those who are unemployed.”

Statement C: “According to human nature, the most talented people will always come out on top.”

Statement D: “Our government is responsible for the nation’s economic well-being.”

1. Which statement is closest to the philosophy of Social Darwinism?
 - a. Speaker A
 - b. Speaker B
 - c. Speaker C
 - d. Speaker D

2. Many wealthy American industrialists of the late 19th century used the theory of Social Darwinism
 - a. to support the labor union movement
 - b. to justify monopolistic actions
 - c. to promote legislation establishing a minimum wage
 - d. to encourage charitable organizations to help the poor
3. In the late 19th century, owners of big businesses generally embraced Social Darwinism because it reinforced their belief
 - a. That economic success demonstrates fitness to lead
 - b. That business monopolies are contrary to the social order
 - c. That wealth should be shared
 - d. That the economy should be regulated

Reading: Yet Calls for Reforms

“With the unequal balance of wealth and poverty it seemed that the rich were growing richer and the poor, poorer. As the growing poverty of America’s workers became increasingly apparent, many called for public and private relief that was not forthcoming. Movements for reform were spurred by the humanitarian concerns reflected in literature (*How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis, 1890, *The Bitter Cry of Children*, John Spargo, 1906, *Progress and Poverty*, Henry George, 1879). Early efforts to help included the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1874), settlement houses such as Hull House in Chicago, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams to offer social services, and the establishment of religious institutions such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (1851), and the Salvation Army (1879), and city missions.” ~ *U.S. History and Government*

4. How was American society becoming more unequal?

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. The actions of Jane Addams, Ida Tarbell, and Booker T. Washington illustrate that reform in the United States has

- a. utilized a variety of methods to achieve many goals
- b. depended on support from religious groups
- c. relied on programs initiated by the Federal Government
- d. promoted women's suffrage as its main goal

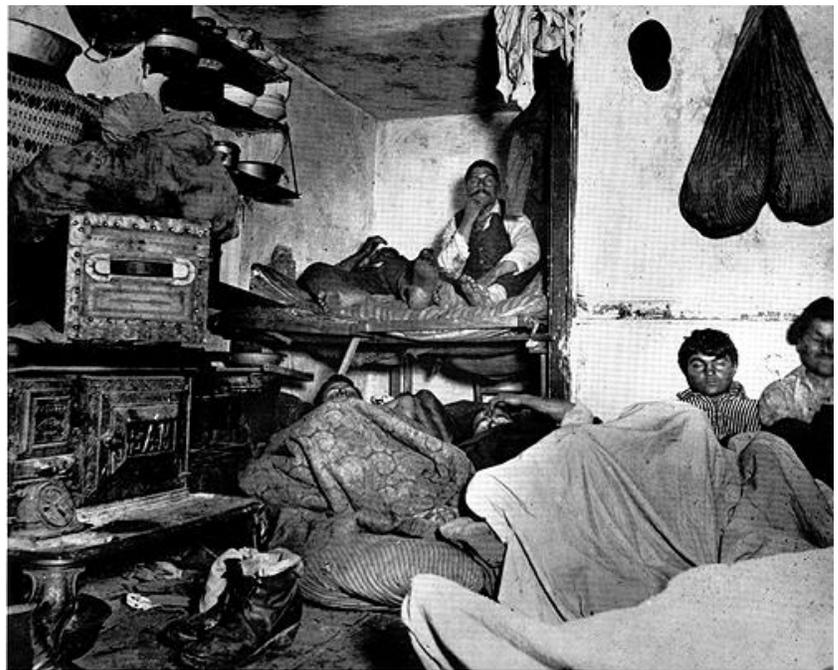
9. Jacob Riis, Jane Addams, and Margaret Sanger are most closely associated with efforts to

- a. educate and train formerly enslaved persons
- b. preserve the natural environment
- c. advance the interests of organized labor
- d. improve conditions for the poor

Reading: Jacob Riis

“Jacob Riis, a police reporter whose work appeared in several New York newspapers, documented the living and working conditions of the poor. Through articles, books, photography, and lantern-slide lectures, Riis served as a mediator between working-class, middle-class, and upper-class citizens.

Riis argued for better housing, adequate lighting and sanitation, and the construction of city parks and playgrounds. He portrayed middle-class and upper-class citizens as benefactors and encouraged them to take an active role in defining and shaping their communities. Riis believed that charitable citizens would help the poor when they saw for themselves how ‘the other half’ lived.” ~ Virginia.edu



Jacob Riis, *Five Cents Lodging, Bayard Street*, c. 1889

Identify two images in the photograph that reveal the hardships and sufferings of the poor:

10. _____

11. _____

12. Do you believe that it is the responsibility of government to alleviate poverty? Explain your answer.
