

Nick Wilczynski

Dr. Ed Vavra

ENL121

29 November 2013

### A Nation of Inequality

“E Pluribus Unum” is the Latin phrase located on the Seal of the United States, as well as the currency of our country. Translated to English, this phrase means “Out of Many, One,” and attempts to show The United States as a country of equals, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, class, or any other factors that cause our country’s citizens to differ from one another. While this equality may be partially true, many members of The United States’ upper class view themselves and their family as superior to members of the lower classes. In Edward Bellamy’s 1888 novel *Looking Backward*, it is told that this type of divide between classes was present during the late nineteenth century as well. Bellamy wrote this fictional novel about the possibility of different classes being nonexistent in the year 2000, contingent on members of society showing more of a concern for the country as a whole, and not being solely focused on themselves and their own interests. Unfortunately, this prediction has not yet occurred, and the gap between the classes has become larger. In an attempt to retain their wealth and maintain a large divide between classes, some members of the upper class will often use their money as power, and accept sociological theories that help ensure they remain the dominant members of society.

Named after Charles Darwin, the famous naturalist and author of the book about his theory of evolution, *The Origin of Species*, social Darwinism claims that groups and classes of humans are subject to the same laws of natural selection that take place in the biological sense.

Charles Darwin did not believe this, and his name was attached to the social Darwinism theory by individuals misunderstanding, and sometimes misrepresenting, what natural selection truly means. “Survival of the fittest,” a term linked in with natural selection, expresses how a species possessing a genetic code that provides them with the healthiest and safest survival in their environment will “survive” the longest because they are the “fittest” to live in that environment. This term is used by believers in social Darwinism, but it is often times taken completely out of context.

While survival of the fittest is a term not meant to be used when describing a species competing against its own species to survive, this is how social Darwinists interpret it. Social Darwinists view the idea of survival of the fittest to mean that the most successful and prosperous humans are the fittest, and any other humans that are not at least equal to them should not be given help in surviving. In the article titled “Two Centuries of Charles Darwin” from *Choice* magazine, Joel Schwartz explains this when he says “Peter Bowler, a prolific writer on Darwin...makes ready use of historical research to separate what is mistakenly regarded as Darwinism from the actual theory. He demonstrates that the concept ‘social Darwinism’ is a misapplication of organic evolution and natural selection to the social sciences. By taking examples from the past century and a half, he shows the dangers of incorrectly interpreting Darwin to justify ideologies that have nothing to do with Darwin's work or opinions.” (2038, 2045) This misunderstanding of Charles Darwin’s ideas, which could be understood fairly quickly by researching the topic, is detrimental to the interests of the majority of the population, and ensures that equality among citizens does not exist. In the late 1800s, Bellamy noticed the beginning stages of this split between classes, a main reason for him writing his novel, as well as other articles on the topic.

When describing the differences between classes and their roles in society, Bellamy uses a wonderful analogy in his novel *Looking Backward*. Julian West, the main character in *Looking Backward*, compares "...society as it then was to a prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged toilsomely along a very hilly and sandy road." (4) The portion of the population "harnessed" to the coach is referring to the lower classes in society having to do the majority of the physical labor, and receiving nothing in return, besides making the lives and bank account size of the upper class greater.

Many citizens in the upper class, consisting mainly of capitalists with great wealth, see themselves as superior because of their success in life, and most are not willing to do the physical labor that they viewed as the role of the lower classes. This is expressed within the analogy when Julian West, explaining the upper class, tells the readers that "...the top [of the coach] was covered with passengers who never got down, even at the steepest ascents. These seats on top were very breezy and comfortable. Well up out of the dust, their occupants could enjoy the scenery at their leisure..." (4) After being told how the lower classes are the ones being attached to this cart and pulling it along treacherous roadways, and then being told about the comfort of the upper class during this journey, this analogy gives a great mental image of how the split between classes looked in the late 1800s.

When viewing the division between classes during the times of Bellamy, and then comparing them to the modern day division in our country, it becomes apparent that this rift has only become wider between the classes. A professor from the University of California at Santa Cruz helps show the difference between the classes, writing on his web page that "As of 2010, the top 1% of households (the upper class) owned 35.4% of all privately held wealth, and the next 19% (the managerial, professional, and small business stratum) had 53.5%, which means

that just 20% of the people owned a remarkable 89%, leaving only 11% of the wealth for the bottom 80% (wage and salary workers).” (Domhoff 3) When shown that 80% of the nation is left with only 11% of all the nation’s privately held wealth, it can easily leave one astounded, and makes it extremely difficult to accept that everyone in our nation is equal.

A major way some of the top earners in the upper class ensure that inequality between classes remains is by using their wealth to mold the minds of politicians. When major politicians receive large “donations” from the wealthiest individuals of the nation, they will do their best to give these members of the upper class whatever they are seeking. Many times, laws are passed by the politicians to appease these wealthy citizens, knowing that a failure to do so will result in less money being given to themselves, as well as other politicians in their party. This money used for manipulating politicians to pass laws allowing for great wealth to be made and retained by the upper class is explained by Matthew Hartman in his article from *Utopian Studies* titled “Utopian Evolution: The Sentimental Critique of Social Darwinism in Bellamy and Peirce” where he tells that “...conservatives such as William Graham Sumner and Andrew Carnegie used Darwin's theory of natural selection as an ideological prop for unrestrained capitalism.” (27) This misrepresentation of what evolution and natural selection truly is helps provide social Darwinists with, what they believe to be, scientific proof for their beliefs. This use of money as political power helps the upper class to guarantee that their wealth, and the power to own the opinions of politicians, remain theirs.

While America is a free country, and the rights and freedoms of the population outweigh those of many other nations, we still have great inequality in many ways. Wealth being used as political power, based on the belief that having money means you are a better person, is a large problem that has only gotten worse since the times of Edward Bellamy. The acceptance of

social Darwinism by the upper class is a large factor in the remaining inequality across the nation, and seems to have no chance of getting any better while money is able to be used as political power in such a grand way.

#### Works Cited

- Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*. Boston, MA: Dover Publications, 1996. Print.
- Domhoff, G. William. "Wealth, Income, and Power." *Who Rules America?*. University of California at Santa Cruz, Feb. 2013. Web. 27 Nov. 2013.
- Hartman, Matthew. "Utopian Evolution: The Sentimental Critique of Social Darwinism in Bellamy and Peirce" *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1999): 26-41. JSTOR. Web. 7 Nov. 2013.
- Schwartz, Joel S. "Two Centuries of Charles Darwin" *Choice* 48.11 (2011): 2037,2038,2040-2049. ProQuest. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.