

Alfred Russel Wallace, William Rathbone Greg and the Origin of Social Darwinism¹

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The main purpose of the study is to critically discuss and evaluate a role of the eminent British scientist Alfred Russel Wallace² and social thinker William Rathbone Greg in the origin and rise of social Darwinism³ in the second half of the nineteenth century. Social Darwinism emerged after 1859 as a specific intellectual response of the educated classes in the Western world to the theory of natural selection proposed by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace with important social and political consequences. Woodruff D. Smith alleged that before 1880s Darwinism had been identified with political radicalism, but in the last decade of the twentieth century the conservative forces appropriated some crucial arguments and concept of Darwinism.⁴ Daniel Gasman

¹ The article constitutes a part of solution of the project SGS 2014-006 of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

² R. A. SLOTTEN, *The Heretic in Darwin's Court. The Life of Alfred Russel Wallace*, New York 2004; M. FICHMAN, *An Elusive Victorian: the Evolution of Alfred Russel Wallace*, Chicago 2004; T. SEVERIN, *The Spice Islands Voyage: The Quest for Alfred Wallace, the Man Who Shared Darwin's Discovery of Evolution*, New York 1997; A. BERRY, *Infinite Tropics: An Alfred Russel Wallace Anthology*, London 2003; J. MARCHANT, *Alfred Russel Wallace: Letters and Reminiscences*, New York 1916; M. SHERMER, *In Darwin's Shadow: The Life and Science of Alfred Russel Wallace*, Oxford 2002; H. CLEMENTS, *Alfred Russel Wallace: Biologist and Social Reformer*, London 1983; A. R. WALLACE, *My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions*, I, London 1905.

³ M. HAWKINS, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860–1945. Nature as Model and Nature as Threat*, Cambridge 1997.

⁴ W. D. SMITH, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism*, New York 1986, pp. 145–146.

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emphasized the contribution of social Darwinism to the radicalization of the political culture in Germany before the First World War.⁵

Charles Darwin himself indicated in *The Descent of Man* a possibility of application of the law of natural selection to human society. He argued that “*at the present day civilized nations are everywhere supplanting barbarous nations, excepting where the climate opposes a deadly barrier*”⁶ and that “*at some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes, as Professor Schaaffhausen has remarked, will no doubt be exterminated. The break will then be rendered wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as at present between the negro or Australian and the gorilla*”.⁷

In his famous remark Charles Darwin argued, that “*with savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed*”.⁸ He emphasized that “*the wonderful progress of the United States,*

⁵ D. GASMAN, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, London 2004.

⁶ C. DARWIN, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, I, London 1871, p. 160; G. HIMMELFARB, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, New York 1962.

⁷ DARWIN, I, p. 201.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 168.

as well as the character of the people, are the results of natural selection; the more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe having emigrated during the last ten or twelve generations to that great country, and having there succeeded best”.⁹ However despite all these Darwin’s explicit statements, for instance Jacques Novicow, one of the most vocal opponents of social Darwinism at the beginning of the twentieth century, was not convinced that Charles Darwin had been personally responsible for the emergence of social Darwinism and its impacts on Western intellectual life and political culture.¹⁰

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Alfred Russel Wallace, an eminent British naturalist, explorer, social activist and publicist, was born in 1823 in the Welsh village of Llanbadoc, near Usk (his family claimed a connection to Scottish rebel William Wallace).¹¹ When he was twenty years old he started to work as a railway civil engineer. Wallace was largely self-taught. He was deeply influenced by radical political ideas of Robert Owen¹² and Thomas Paine. Early in 1848, Alfred Russel Wallace who wanted to imitate great scientific travels conducted by Alexander von Humboldt or Charles Darwin¹³ left accompanied by his friend the entomologist Henry Walter Bates England for Brazil to collect insects and other specimens and to do research on the origin of species.¹⁴ His decision was directly inspired by the book *A Voyage Up the River Amazon, with a residency at Pará* (1847) written by an American entomologist William Henry Edwards whom Wallace and Bates met in London.¹⁵

⁹ Ibidem, p. 179.

¹⁰ “Sans doute, Charles Darwin n’est nullement responsable des conséquences tirées de théorie qu’il avait nettement confinées dans le domaine biologique.” J. NOVICOW, *La Critique du Darwinisme Social*, Paris 1910, p. 8.

¹¹ WALLACE, p. 3.

¹² Ibidem, pp. 88–105.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 256.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 257.

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp. 264–265.

Alfred Russel Wallace was personally introduced to Charles Darwin at the beginning of 1854 after his return from the Amazon Basin when he was preparing his next expedition to the Malay Archipelago by a study of the insects and birds. The both men met in the Insect-room of the British Museum and exchanged a few minutes' conversation only. Several months later, when Wallace (who was influenced by his reading of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*¹⁶ and *An Essay on the Principle Population* by Thomas Robert Malthus) was staying in Borneo, he prepared a paper entitled *On the law which has regulated the Introduction of New Species*,¹⁷ in which he indicated the existence of a simple universal law regulating diversity and distribution of species.¹⁸ Alfred Russel Wallace appeared to be

¹⁶ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* which were published anonymously by Robert Chambers in 1844 had a significant impact on the educated classes especially on the British Isles and in the United States of America. This highly popular book on natural history summarized contemporary knowledge of astronomy, geology, chemistry, physics, phrenology, political economy and anthropology. Queen Victoria, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Abraham Lincoln, William Ewart Gladstone, Arthur Schopenhauer, Francis Newman, John Stuart Mill, William Stanley Jevons, Florence Nightingale, Alfred Tennyson, Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Eliot belonged among the readers of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. R. CHAMBERS, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation and Other Evolutionary Writings*, Chicago 1994, orig. publish. 1844, pp. ix–x). As real author was unknown for several decades until 1884 (CHAMBERS, p. xviii), the authorship was attributed for instance to geologist Charles Lyell, naturalist Charles Darwin, phrenologist George Combe (in the catalog of the British Museum was featured as a writer until 1877), the Scottish moral philosopher Alexander Bain, writer William Thackeray, physician William Carpenter, mathematician Charles Babbage, anatomist Richard Owen, naturalist Edward Forbes, astronomer John Pringle Nichol, Whig politician Henry Brough, naturalist Richard Vyvyan, Harriet Martineau, an author of several treatises on political economy, Edinburgh writer Catherine Crowe, daughter of Lord Byron Countess Ada Lovelace, Anna Chambers, or even Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, who had scientific interests. CHAMBERS, pp. xl–xli.

¹⁷ A. R. WALLACE, *On the law which has regulated the Introduction of New Species*, in: *Annals and Magazine of Natural History, including Zoology, Botany, and Geology*, Vol. 16 (September 1855), pp. 184–196; WALLACE, *My Life*, I, p. 355.

¹⁸ Already in December 28, 1847, Alfred Russel Wallace wrote down an interesting remark in his letter to Henry Walter Bates: “*I have rather a more favourable opinion of the Vestiges than you appear to have. I do not consider it a hasty generalization, but rather as an ingenious hypothesis strongly supported by some striking facts and analogies, but which remains to be proved by more facts and the additional light which more research may throw upon the problem [...] Many eminent writers support the theory of the progressive development of animals and plants. There is a very philosophical work bearing directly on the question –*

aware that Charles Darwin had been himself preparing a study on evolution of species and sent him a letter with a special reference of his article published in *Annals and Magazine of Natural History, including Zoology, Botany, and Geology*.¹⁹ Wallace believed until the end of his life that Charles Darwin had already written a sketch of his own theory of natural selection in 1842. Two years later Darwin's 230 folio pages, which were gradually enlarged into the *Origin of Species*, would have been read by Joseph Hooker and discussed with Charles Lyell for many years.²⁰ The idea of survival of the fittest and struggle for existence occurred to Wallace in February 1858, when he was living at Ternate, one of the Moluccas Islands.²¹ Alfred Russel Wallace posted his remarks to Charles Darwin and asked him to show them eventually (if he thought it sufficiently important) to Charles Lyell as well. Charles Darwin immediately after having received Wallace's letter wrote to Charles Lyell as follows: "*Your words have come true with a vengeance – that I should be forestalled [...] I never saw a more striking coincidence; if Wallace had my MSS. sketch written out in 1842, he could not have made a better short abstract! Even his terms now stand as heads of chapters [...] So all my originality, whatever it may amount to, will be smashed, though my book, if it will ever have any value, will not be deteriorated; as all the labour consists in*

Lawrence's Lectures on Man – delivered before the Royal College of Surgeons, now published in a cheap form. The great object of these Lectures is to illustrate the different races of mankind, and the manner in which they probably originated, and he arrives at the conclusion (as also does Pritchard in his work on the Physical History of Man) that the varieties of the human race have not been produced by any external causes, but are due to the development of certain distinctive peculiarities in some individuals which have thereafter become propagated through an entire race. Now, I should say that a permanent peculiarity not produced by external causes is a characteristic of species and not of mere variety, and thus, if the theory of the Vestiges is accepted, the Negro, the Red Indian, and the European are distinct species of the genus Homo." WALLACE, *My Life*, I, pp. 254–255.

¹⁹ However, in Wallace's own biography there is one interesting notice: "*I was, of course, very much surprised to find that the same idea had occurred to Darwin, and that he had already nearly completed a large work fully developing it.*" Ibidem, p. 363.

²⁰ A. R. WALLACE, *The Dawn of a Great Discovery: "My Relations with Darwin in Reference to the Theory of Natural Selection"*, in: Black and White, Vol. 27, 17 January 1903, p. 78.

²¹ WALLACE, *The Dawn*, p. 78; WALLACE, *My Life*, I, pp. 360–363.

the application of the theory."²² Subsequently, Wallace's study (reprinted in *Essays on Natural Selection*, 1870) and an extract from Darwin's MS. work of 1844 were presented jointly to the Linnean Society in London on 1 July 1858, and published under the title *On the Tendency of Species to form Varieties; and on the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection* in *Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnean Society of London* on 20 August 20 1858.²³ Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared the following year and Alfred Russel Wallace read it with "highest interest" in village Bessir at Ternate in summer 1860.²⁴ He immediately remarked that "*Mr. Darwin has given the world a new science, and his name should, in my opinion, stand above that of every philosopher of ancient or modern times. The force of admiration can no further go!!!*"²⁵

During his stay on Java in 1861, Alfred Russel Wallace expressed his respect for the Dutch "*admirable system of supervision and government*": "*Nothing is worse and more absurd than the sneering prejudiced tone in which almost all English writers speak of the Dutch government in the East. It never has been worse than ours has been, and it is now very much better [...] I cannot help bearing witness to the excellence of their government of native races, gentle yet firm, respecting their manners, customs, and prejudices, yet introducing everywhere European law, order, and industry.*"²⁶ Thus, he preferred the Dutch monopolistic and paternalistic colonial despotism to the English free trade system.

²² Cit. WALLACE, *The Dawn*, p. 78.

²³ In his preface to *Essays on Natural Selection* (1870) Alfred Russel Wallace admitted: "*I have felt all my life, and I still feel, the most sincere satisfaction that Mr. Darwin had been at work long before me and that it was not left for me to attempt to write the Origin of Species [...] Far abler men than myself may confess that they have not that untiring patience in accumulating and that wonderful skill in using large masses of facts of the most varied kind, that wide and accurate physiological knowledge, that acuteness in devising and skill in carrying out experiments, and that admirable style of composition, at once clear, persuasive and judicial – qualities which in their harmonious combination mark out Mr. Darwin as the man best fitted for the great work has undertaken and accomplished.*" Ibidem.

²⁴ WALLACE, *My Life*, I, p. 372.

²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 372–373.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 382.

In April 1862, Alfred Russel Wallace came back to the United Kingdom after eight years doing field research in the Malay Archipelago with a collection of 16,000 specimens of insects, birds, and shells.²⁷ His position in the British scientific community seemed to be secured. Charles Lyell became his close friend.²⁸ He made presentations before the audiences of Zoological Society and Linnean Society and prepared his comprehensive survey *The Malay Archipelago* (finally published in 1869), regarded as one of the best diaries of scientific field exploration published in the nineteenth century (exploited by Joseph Conrad in several of his exotic novels). In 1866, Wallace married the eldest daughter of William Mitten, then the greatest English authority on mosses and an enthusiastic botanist and gardener.²⁹ Despite the fact that the sale of his collection provided him with a sufficient income for a single man, Alfred Russel Wallace was compelled to search a permanent job outside academic milieu: “*The possibility of ever earning anything substantial either by lecturing or by writing never occurred to me.*”³⁰ The position of the assistant secretary of the Royal Geographical Society was vacant in 1864, but Wallace was convinced that his friend Bates was more qualified. He tried without success to become a director of the Bethnal Green Museum opened in 1872 or a superintendent for protection of Epping Forest acquired by the Corporation of London (in 1878).³¹ Finally, thanks to Darwin’s assistance he received a small government pension in 1881.

Because of Wallace’s radical social ideas, John Stuart Mill invited him to become member of *Land Tenure Reform Association*. Alfred Russel Wallace wrote many articles on the subject of landownerships and was convinced that land should be owned by state. He was elected the first president of the

²⁷ WALLACE, *My Life*, I, p. 373; J. VETTER, *The Unmaking of an anthropologist: Wallace returns from the field, 1862–70*, in: Notes & Records of the Royal Society, Vol. 64, 2010, pp. 25–42; J. CAMERINI, *Wallace in the field*, in: Osiris, Vol. 11, pp. 44–65.

²⁸ WALLACE, *My Life*, I, p. 417.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 411.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 415.

³¹ Ibidem, pp. 415–417.

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Land Nationalization Society established in 1881 and published an influential book *Land Nationalization; Its Necessity and Its Aims* (London 1882). Later, Wallace considered himself to be a socialist. Contrary to some other Darwin's adherents, he opposed the eugenic movement. His other major scientific works included *The Geographic Distribution of Animals* (London 1880) and *Darwinism* (London 1889). In 1886 and 1887 Wallace spent ten months in the United States. In his book *Man's place in the universe* (London 1904) Wallace expressed his skepticism toward the possibility of life outside the Earth. On the other hand, Alfred Russel Wallace advocated phrenology, spiritualism³² and anti-vaccination campaign. He died on 7 November 1913, aged ninety years.

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It seems that Charles Darwin despite his interest in human evolution decided to exclude the issue from the *Origin of Species* because of its controversial nature. In his letter from May 1857 to Alfred Russel Wallace the discoverer of natural selection wrote: "*You ask whether I shall discuss man. I think I shall avoid the whole subject, as so surrounded with prejudices; though I fully admit it is the highest and most interesting problem for the naturalist.*"³³ Alfred Russel Wallace exploited the intellectual vacuum created by Darwin's precaution.

In 1863, about one year after Wallace's return to England, James Hunt, Richard Francis Burton and several other members left the Ethnological Society of London and established the rival Anthropological Society of London, which organized its first meeting on 6 January 1863. The rivalry between the both institutions presented a characteristic feature of the academic life in the Great Britain until the re-unification of both groups in the early 1870s. James Hunt and his followers, mostly with background in natural

³² A. R. WALLACE, *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism; Three Essays*, London 1875.

³³ HAWKINS, p. 28.

sciences and comparative anatomy, advocated the definition of anthropology as “*the science of the whole nature of man*”.³⁴ The concept of race played an important role in the struggle. The Ethnological Society of London (led by John Lubbock) understood human race in the traditional linguistic and historical terms, whereas for the Anthropological Society of London race presented physical entity with the same ontological status as animal species.

Alfred Russel Wallace chose the scientific platform of the Anthropological Society of London to articulate his view on the importance of the new paradigm for our understanding of the origin and evolution of humankind in his lecture *The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man deduced from the theory of “Natural Selection”* on 1 March 1864.³⁵ In his presentation Alfred Russel Wallace formulated as the first the crucial questions anticipating the “big debate” of social Darwinism: “*Can this theory (of natural selection) be applied in any way to the question of the origin of the races of man? Or is there anything in human nature that takes him out of the category of those organic existences, over whose successive mutations it has had such powerful sway?*”³⁶ Alfred Russel Wallace advocated the great antiquity of human species which would have inhabited the surface of the earth for a period of a hundred thousand centuries (even in the Eocene or Miocene, ten millions of years ago), was contemporaneous with many extinct animals and survived dramatic alterations of the earth’s surface “*fifty or a hundred times greater than any that have occurred during the historical period*”.³⁷

Wallace believed in a primitive diversity of humankind and emphasized the historical permanence of existing racial types.³⁸ However, he admitted that

³⁴ VETTER, pp. 26–27.

³⁵ A. R. WALLACE, *The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man deduced from the theory of “Natural Selection”*, in: *Journal of the Anthropological Society*, Vol. II, No. V, 1864, pp. clviii–clxxxvii.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. clxi.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. clviii. Charles Lyell as a geologist objected to this dating. WALLACE, *My Life*, pp. 418–419.

³⁸ “*The Portuguese and Spaniards, settled for two or three centuries in South America, retain their chief physical, mental, and moral characteristics; the Dutch boers at the Cape, and*

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a relative immobility for four or five thousand years does not preclude an advancement at an earlier epoch; simply later in the ancient history any further physical changes would have been checked.³⁹ The main obstacle why the law of natural selection could not have been applied to modern human is his social and sympathetic nature: “*The action of natural selection is therefore checked; the weaker, the dwarfish, those of less active limbs, or less piercing eyesight, do not suffer the extreme penalty which falls upon animals so defective.*”⁴⁰ Therefore, mental and moral qualities become more important on the expense of physical characteristics: “*Man [...] does not require longer nails or teeth, greater bodily strength or swiftness.*”⁴¹ Human by his capacity of clothing and making weapons and tools took himself away from the powerful natural forces which changes and shapes the external physical form and structure of any other animal. The interactions between human and nature have been taking place at the level of intellect only; an unchanged body could be still keep in harmony with the changing universe.⁴² As an animal human would remain almost stationary.⁴³ As an intellectual being he has been gradually elevated to the perfection incarnated by “*the wonderful intellect of the Germanic races*”.⁴⁴

On the other hand, Alfred Russel Wallace emphasized that “*in all ages, and in every quarter of the globe, the inhabitants of temperate have been superior to those of tropical countries. All the great invasions and*

the descendants of the early Dutch settlers in the Moluccas, have not lost the features or the colour of the Germanic races; the Jews, scattered over the world in the most diverse climates, retain the same characteristic lineaments everywhere; the Egyptian sculptures and paintings show us that, for at least 4000 or 5000 years, the strongly contrasted features of the Negro and Semitic races have remained altogether unchanged; while more recent discoveries prove that, in the case at least of the American aborigines, the mound-builders of the Mississippi valley, and the dwellers on Brazilian mountains, had still in the very infancy of the human race the same characteristic type of cranial formation that now distinguishes them.” WALLACE, *The Origin of Human Races*, p. clix.

³⁹ Ibidem, pp. clix–clx.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. clxii.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. clxiii.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Ibidem, pp. clxiii–clxiv.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. clxiv.

displacements of races have been from North to South".⁴⁵ He argued that the great law of "the preservation of favored races in the struggle for life" should lead to the "inevitable extinction of all those low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come in contact. The red Indian in North America, and in Brazil; the Tasmanian, Australian and New Zealander in the southern hemisphere, die out, not from any one special cause, but from the inevitable effects of an unequal mental and physical struggle".⁴⁶

Thus, Alfred Russel Wallace was convinced that the human races emerged (probably from a single homogeneous race without the faculty of speech and inhabiting a tropical region) through the action of "natural selection". However, the mental advancement weakened the impact of the natural forces on our physical constitution and made human races almost stationary.⁴⁷ Alfred Russel Wallace seemed to be very optimistic about the human potential. Humankind not only escaped the consequences of the "natural selection", but it could be able to take control over natural forces as well. Wallace anticipated the time when the earth would produce only cultivated plants and domestic animals and the general improvement of physical and moral conditions of human existence until the world would be again "inhabited by a single homogenous race, no individual of which will be inferior to the noblest specimens of existing humanity".⁴⁸ Therefore, Alfred Russel Wallace outlined before the members of the Anthropological Society of London the link between the concept of the racial history of humankind and a pseudo-political utopian expectation.

The reception of the Wallace lecture by the audience of the Anthropological Society of London was rather restrained, almost deprecatory. Luke Burke expressed his respect for Wallace's talents, but otherwise he declared Wallace's case to be "altogether hopeless" and refused the whole Darwin's theory of

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. clxiv–clxv.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. clxvi.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, pp. clxviii–clxxx.

natural selection.⁴⁹ However, some other members of the society, George Witt, or Sidney Edward Bouverie Bouverie-Pusey, advocated Darwin. Thomas Bendyshe, an anthropologist and a translator of the work of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach into English, remarked that Charles Darwin (and Alfred Russel Wallace) applied the doctrine of Malthus with redoubled force to the animal kingdom.⁵⁰ James Reddie labeled Wallace's approach as "*extremely Utopian*" and "*totally inconsistent with all the facts of man's experience*".⁵¹ Carter Blake questioned the categories of inferior and superior races and declared that "*the whole theory of Mr. Darwin seems destined to pass through an age when it will be utterly misconceived and misrepresented by the general public*".⁵²

James Hunt, who presided over meeting and was a polygenist, expressed "*a feeling of disappointment*". It appeared to him that Wallace's paper dealt "*very largely with assumptions*": "*Mr. Wallace's theory appears to me not to be warranted by our present knowledge, and we cannot, I think, accept it*".⁵³ The debate subsequently partly resulted into the short polemics between polygenists and monogenists. James Hunt emphasized, that if human could take away the power of natural selection, "*what a powerless thing natural selection must be*". In this sentence, James Hunt – obviously unconsciously – anticipated the strong arguments of social Darwinists in the next decades of the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, for James Hunt, the Darwinian hypothesis presented "*a purely philosophic speculation*" and "*no part of inductive science*": "*As students of science we must object to this sort of dreaming, because it cannot be based on evidence. Some members of this society are accused of bringing forward speculations; but none of them have yet brought forward anything a thousandth part as speculative as this.*"⁵⁴ In next years, Alfred Russel Wallace was pulling away from the Anthropological

⁴⁹ Ibidem, pp. clxx–clxxii.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. clxxiii.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. clxxiv.

⁵² Ibidem, pp. clxxv–clxxvii.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. clxxviii.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, pp. clxxx–clxxxi.

Society of London. In 1866, he joined the Ethnological Society of London, which became under the leadership of John Lubbock an important platform for Darwinian movement.⁵⁵

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The English social and political philosopher William Rathbone Greg was born in Manchester in 1809 as the youngest son of a banker and merchant. He was educated at the University of Edinburgh where – as a student of William Hamilton – he paid attention to some problems of phrenology and animal magnetism. Later, he divided his time between the business activities and metaphysical, theological and social writings and speculations. In 1830, two years after leaving the university he travelled through France and Switzerland to Italy and Sicily. After his stay in Florence and Rome (he admired especially Machiavelli) he embarked at Naples for Greece. Then he followed through Asia Minor to Constantinople and northwards through Hungary to Vienna. On his return to England he published anonymously *Sketches in Greece and Turkey, with the Present and Future Prospects of the Turkish Empire* (London 1833). Greg spent nine following years in Manchester responsible for the management of the mill at Bury and doing business on his own account. In 1833, he married the daughter of a physician and a chemist. He was involved into the agitation surrounding corn-law and became a regular contributor of the *Economist*, *Edinburgh Review*, and *Westminster*. Until 1850, because of the economic crises Greg almost exhausted all his capital and settled down in Wansfell, near Ambleside. William Rathbone Greg visited several times Alexis de Tocqueville in Normandy and Walter Bagehot belonged among his close friends. In his political views he gradually moved from moderate liberal into conservative camp. He expressed his unorthodox ideas on the contemporary religious life in England in *The Creed of Christendom; Its Foundations and Superstructure* (London 1851). In 1856, William Rathbone Greg accepted a

⁵⁵ VETTER, p. 31.

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place on the Board of Customs. Eight years later, Lord Palmerston offered him the Controllershship of the Stationary Office where Greg remained till his retirement in 1877. He died in London on 15 November 1881.⁵⁶

Greg responded to Wallace study on the importance of the law of natural selection for the understanding of modern human society and history in his own article published in *Fraser's Magazine* in September 1868.⁵⁷ Greg argued at the beginning of his article, that “*everyone now is familiar with the Darwinian theory of the origin of species, at least in its main principles and outlines: and nearly all men qualified to form an opinion are convinced of its substantial truth*”.⁵⁸ Alfred Russel Wallace showed in his “*admirable paper*” how the principle of natural selection has been modified, veiled and disguised, though by no means neutralized or suspended in the human, because our species adapts itself to the altered conditions of external nature by mental not by physical modifications.⁵⁹ However, William Rathbone Greg warned that our modern civilization could have been retarded and even endangered by the tendency to neutralize the law of natural selection, because “*the great wise, righteous, and beneficent principle which in all other animals, and in man himself, up to a certain stage of his progress, tends to the improvement and perfection of the race, would appear to be forcibly interfered with and nearly set aside*”.⁶⁰

Greg was convinced that the principle of natural selection positively favoring the ablest, the strongest and the most advanced does not appear to fail in the case of races of men and nations: “*Everywhere the savage tribes of mankind die out at the contact of the civilized ones.*”⁶¹ Romans conquered and triumphed over Greeks and other nations because of their

⁵⁶ W. R. GREG, *Enigmas of Life*, London 1891, pp. vii–xli.

⁵⁷ W. R. GREG, *On the failure of “natural selection” in the case of man*, in: *Fraser's Magazine*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. CCCCLXV, 1868, pp. 353–362.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 353.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 354.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 356.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

racial superiority: “*The same may be said of those rude Northern warriors who at a later period flowed over and mastered the degenerate Roman world.*”⁶² The natural selection applied to intellect, art, commerce and to science enabled the Italians to become the most prominent people in Europe. It gave to the Spaniards the right to rule, to discover and to conquer. In history, the physical energy and the strong will are more needed than the advancement of humanity. Therefore, “*civilization, with its social, moral, and material complications,*” caused not that intellectual has been substituted for physical superiority (as Alfred Russel Wallace argued), but that artificial and conventional marginalized natural superiority as the “*ruling and deciding force*”.⁶³ Fortune would prevail over nature; those social groups, emasculated by luxury, would triumph over the strongest, the healthiest and the most perfectly organized populations; élite of the race would be ruin by élite of wealth and property: “*In a wild state, by the law of natural selection, only, or chiefly, the sounder and stronger specimens were allowed to continue their species; with us, thousands with tainted constitutions, with frames weakened by malady or waste, with brains bearing subtle and hereditary mischief in their recesses, are suffered to transmit their terrible inheritance of evil to other generations, and to spread it through a whole community.*”⁶⁴ The inferior and less favored race would prevail by virtue not of its stronger vitality but of its weaker reticence and its faults.

William Rathbone Greg called for new legislations and constitutions based on paternal despotism to enable that “*the beneficent tendencies of nature*” would continue to operate without social restrictions. Under the new republic, paupers should be forbidden to propagate; all candidates for a “*solemn privilege of continuing an untainted and perfecting race*” should pass a competitive examination. “*Every damaged or inferior temperament might be eliminated, and every special and superior one be selected and*

⁶² Ibidem, p. 357.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 358.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 359.

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enthroned, – till the human race, both in its manhood and its womanhood, became one glorious congregation of saints, sages, and athletes: – till we were all Blondins, all Shakespeares, Pericles', Socrates', Columbuses and Fénelons. But no nation – in modern times at least – has ever yet approached this ideal; no such wisdom or virtue has ever been found except in isolated individual instances; no government and no statesman has ever yet dared thus to supplement the inadequacy of personal patriotism by laws so sapiently despotic. The face of the leading peoples of the existing world is not even set in this direction – but rather the reverse."⁶⁵

William Rathbone Greg criticized the modern tendencies including the emphasis on the freedom of the individual will, resentment to control and punishment of natural propensity, encouragement of propagation of incapacity, poverty, and constitutional disorders of the poor, and the advancement of democracy meaning the management and control of social arrangements by the least educated classes.⁶⁶ William Rathbone Greg declared the issue of race being closely linked to the destiny of humanity. The solution of the challenge is complicated by the modern dilemma between moral and mental enlightenment and the deterioration of the physical constitution of the nations through the negligence of the law of natural selection.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibidem, pp. 361–362.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 362.

⁶⁷ The Greg's essay published in *Fraser's Magazine* was criticized by an author of the article *Natural and supernatural selection* (*Spectator*, 3 October 1868, pp. 10–11). Greg was ironically reproached for not proposing the "remedy" by "abolishing hospitals and putting to death feeble children in their infancy, or, on the other hand, by proclaiming a confiscation and universal scramble for property every fifty years or so" (p. 10). The author postulated the moral "law of supernatural selection" demanding the sacrifice of the strong for the weak (p. 11). This is what distinguishes us from the natural selection of races in the lower animal world: "If we are to complain that the Darwinian theorem does not apply to man, we are complaining that we are in the truest sense men at all" (p. 11). The debate continued in *Spectator*, 17 October 1868 (pp. 11–12), in an article under the title *The Darwinian Jeremiad*: "If there were no 'failure' in the operation of the Darwinian principle selection, there would be a failure in human nature" (p. 11). In *The Quarterly Journal of Science* (Vol. VI, 1869, pp. 152–153), there appeared a short summary of the debate under the title *The alleged Failure of Natural Selection in the case of Man*. The statement from *Spectator* was criticized for "the mysterious term 'supernatural selection'" and a "neglect of the fact that civilized man is a

William Rathbone Greg developed his arguments from the *Fraser's Magazine* in his books including *Political Problems for our Age and Country* (1870), *The Enigmas of Life* (1872) and *Rocks Ahead, or the Warnings of Cassandra* (1874). He complained that “statesmanship is at a low ebb in England.”⁶⁸ Elsewhere, the situation is far from better: “There were giants in those days; there are none now. Not only can we find no Pericles in this age; not only do we see no one like Ximenes or Alberoni, who governed Spain so long, or like Richelieu or Sully who ruled France for half a life time, and through her ruled Europe.”⁶⁹ The reason for this ominous state is the political system of democracy (embodied in the Reform Act) consisting in an ascendancy and a preponderance of lower classes, uneducated, unsophisticated and mediocre men: “Everything in a parliamentary nation must be – compromise; and compromise is not a soil in which the higher qualities of statesmanship can take root, or flourish.”⁷⁰ Especially Greg’s book *The Enigmas of Life* (1872) could be interpreted not as a foundation of social Darwinism, but as a strong advocacy and an attempt to rehabilitate Malthus heritage exploiting some Darwinian and natural selection idioms.

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German anthropologist Friedrich Rolle stressed the role of natural selection in the European racial history in his book *Der Mensch, Seine Abstammung und Gesittung im Lichte der Darwinischen Lehre* (Frankfurt am Main 1866). American author Charles Loring Brace, who was influenced by his reading of Charles Darwin, published *The Races of the Old World* in 1863 advocating the inferiority of black race and slavery in the South.⁷¹ Finally, in 1869, Francis

social animal, in a truly zoological sense” (p. 152).

⁶⁸ W. R. GREG, *Political Problems for our Age and Country*, London 1870, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 10.

⁷¹ HAWKINS, pp. 62–65.

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Galton issued *Hereditary Genius*.⁷² These men and Herbert Spencer, Walter Bagehot, Ernst Haeckel, or Georges Vacher de Lapouge have been considered as the founders of social Darwinism. The short debate between Alfred Russel Wallace and William Rathbone Greg on the applicability of the concept of natural selection for the understanding of human society and history has been completely overshadowed by these personalities despite the fact that both scholars were highly interested in the political dimension of the Darwinian worldview.

Abstract

The contribution of Alfred Russel Wallace and William Rathbone Greg to the debate on the possibility of application of the law of natural selection to human society and the subsequent emergence of social Darwinism with dramatic consequences in the political life of the West has been largely neglected by historians of science despite the interest of both scholars in the practical political utility of the theory of Charles Darwin.

Keywords

Charles Darwin; Alfred Russel Wallace; William Rathbone Greg; Social Darwinism; Natural Selection; Human Races

⁷² In his other scientific works including for instance *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (1874), *The History of Twins, as a Criterion of the Relative Powers of Nature and Nurture* (1875), *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Development* (1883) Francis Galton coined the term *eugenics*. In 1907, Francis Galton established *Eugenics Education Society* in London.