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# Differentiating Eugenics and Social Darwinism

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## Abstract

**Session: Eugenics I & II (Double session. Part I, eugenic traits: Amir Teicher, Rob Wilson, Caroline Lyster. Part II, politics and eugenics: Judy Johns Schloegel, Aida Roige Mas, Gordon McOuat)** In the late XIXth and early XXth centuries, social Darwinism and eugenics were two different sociopolitical trends. One might think that their chief difference was this: eugenicists defended government intervention for the improvement of human breeding, while social Darwinists opted for *laissez-faire*, individualistic capitalism. While their positions on state interventionism are certainly different, I will argue that there's a more central point defining and distinguishing those trends. This is how they thought about fitness. For eugenicists, traits (especially those deemed "intellectual") were subject to judgments of value. Their fitness was assessed by what was conventionally thought to provide for success in a society: cleverness, moral appropriateness, etc. Eugenicists thought those traits underlying social inequalities were highly heritable. To improve fitness was to augment the ratio of "good" traits over "bad" ones across generations. Conversely, social Darwinists weren't so much concerned with defining the traits or in their heritability. They also related fitness to socioeconomic status in a conventional sense (i.e. Sumner's famous "millionaires are a product of natural selection", 1902). But they thought it was competitive struggle that improves fitness during the lifetime of an individual, and collectively over generations. In explaining their differences, we will see how, while conceptually different, historically both trends were easily taken for one another. This is because the core ideas of social Darwinism are compatible with assuming that the basis of what makes one "fit" is heritable (e.g., Sumner on geniality), just as eugenics is compatible with non-interventionism (e.g., contemporary "market eugenics").

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