

# Darwin, Spencer and Morgan: Great Minds of Evolution

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The American Mind (History 268)

April 26, 2000

Lewis Henry Morgan, best known for his work in the field of anthropology and ethnology, was born in Aurora, New York in 1818. In 1840, he graduated from Union College and moved to Rochester where he was admitted to the bar. Through his membership in the secret society known as the Gordian Knot, he came to be friends with a man named Ely Parker, a member of the Seneca Indian Tribe. It was through Mr. Parker that Morgan became fascinated with the evolution of society on which his greatest scientific works would be based.<sup>1</sup> Before his death, Lewis Henry Morgan donated some of his correspondence to the University of Rochester. If it were not for this forethought, many letters from such notable people as Charles Darwin, which provide insight into his life, would be lost. Either he, towards the end of his life, or Mrs. Morgan, on the occasion of her husband's passing, disposed of the remaining hordes of the more personal letters and business papers.<sup>2</sup>

Through his work on the evolution of society, Morgan became acquainted with other prominent scientists of the period, including Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. While in London in 1871, just after the publication of his *Systems of Consanguinity*, Morgan realized what a large impression the work had made in England. Morgan wrote in his journal that he “would like to meet some of the famous men (Charles Darwin, John McLennan, Thomas Huxley, and Sir John Lubbock) here.”<sup>3</sup> He wrote a letter to Darwin and Darwin agreed to a luncheon. Throughout lunch, the two talked mainly about Morgan's work on the evolution of the beaver, with which Darwin was much impressed.

In his own work on natural selection and evolution, Darwin was reluctant to extend his theory to the evolution of man. When he saw that “many naturalists fully accepted the doctrine of the evolution of species, it seemed to [him] advisable to work up such notes as [he] possessed and to publish a special treatise on the origins of man.”<sup>4</sup> With the

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Holmes, *Biographical Memoir of Lewis Henry Morgan, 1818-1881* (Washington D.C.: Judd & Detweiler, 1908), p. 221-222.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Resek, *Lewis Henry Morgan: American Scholar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Resek, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Nora Barlow ed. *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1958), p. 131.

publication of *Descent of Man*, Darwin tied humans to the natural world governed by evolution and not by Divine creation.

By the early 1870s, anthropologists had already begun to apply evolutionary theory to human culture and society. The ideas of the cultural evolution and biological evolution of humans developed in parallel.<sup>5</sup> Darwin himself made use of social evolution to explain why colonization “seemed to drive the 'lower' races into a decline towards extinction.”<sup>6</sup> Man evolved from a primitive form to a civilized being. This field of social evolution was taken up by both Lewis Morgan and Herbert Spencer.

In his 9 July 1877 letter to Lewis Henry Morgan to “merely thank him,” Darwin mentions that all his time is being consumed with his work on plants. His botanical work which describes the “evolution of structure and function from primitive to more advanced forms,” of plants sold an average (annual?) of 2200 copies.<sup>7</sup> In 1877, he published *The Different Forms of Flowers on Plants of the Same Species* followed by *The Power of Movement in Plants* in 1880. Most likely this is the research he was performing at the time he wrote the letter.

In his initial letter to Darwin, Morgan must have mentioned Herbert Spencer's most recent book, *Principles of Sociology* (1877), since Darwin responds that he has not yet had a chance to read it. In his works, Spencer attempts to show that society is ever changing and that this change also changes the function of each individual in that society.<sup>8</sup> He accounts for changes such as those from a lack of religion to worshipping ancestors and funeral rights and also from sexual promiscuity to monogamy. After *Principles of Sociology*, Spencer continued to work on social evolution. He published eight more volumes spanning from 1877 to 1896 and multiple editions of the first.<sup>9</sup>

This argument was similar to that made by Lewis Henry Morgan in his work which Darwin also regrets having not yet read. In 1877, Morgan published his most famous work, *Ancient Society*, which, besides commenting on the evolution of the family, also examined the evolution of intelligence, government, and the idea of property.<sup>10</sup> Morgan's book was so well received among American scholars that it was described as the “foundation of all future work in American historical science.”<sup>11</sup> Darwin, in his letter, recognizes the amount of effort that it must have taken Morgan and so concludes that the he must be in good health

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<sup>5</sup> Barlow, p. 191-2.

<sup>6</sup> Barlow, p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> William B. Thesing, Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 57, "Victorian Prose Writers after 1867" (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987), p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Thesing p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> J. Rumney, Herbert Spencer's Sociology: A Study in the History of Social Theory (London: Williams and Northgate, Limited, 1934), p. 312.

<sup>10</sup> Holmes, p. 227.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Resek, p. 142.

(although Darwin himself always seems to become ill during his compositional process<sup>12</sup>).

In their work, Darwin, Morgan, and Spencer, all attempted to explain human development from, as Morgan states, savagery to civilization and thus beginning the idea of social evolution.<sup>13</sup> Spencer and Darwin are frequently paired together as the men responsible for bringing the idea of evolution to the forefront. Generally the men had great respect and admiration for each other and their work. However, Darwin writes that “his [Spencer's] conclusions never convince me” and that “his deductive manner of treating every subject is wholly opposed to my frame of mind.”<sup>14</sup> It is this sentiment that Darwin also mentions in his letter to Morgan.

Darwin preferred to do extensive research before writing on a subject in order to be able to concretely prove his hypothesis. He says in his autobiography that he believed in 1838 that his theory of evolution must apply to man as well but continued to do research until he began writing in 1868.<sup>15</sup> Spencer's “deductive style” never seemed to be satisfactory to Darwin. In the letter, Darwin says that the topics Spencer covers would be more appropriate for “many years' work.” Nevertheless, Darwin has great respect for Spencer's talent and although will not admit to having profited from Spencer's work, it was Spencer who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” which Darwin took and expanded on in *Descent of Man*. In his letter to Lewis Henry Morgan, in which he claims to “have nothing else to say” except for thank you, Charles Darwin demonstrates not only his intellectual pursuit, but also his opinion on the work of another evolutionary thinker.

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<sup>12</sup> Barlow, p.131.

<sup>13</sup> Holmes, p. 227.

<sup>14</sup> Barlow, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Barlow, p. 130.

# Transcription of a letter from Charles Darwin to Lewis Henry Morgan

*[The original letter is held in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections Department.]*

July 9th

Down,  
Beckenham, Kent  
Railway Station  
Orpington S.E.R.

My Dear Sir

I thank you sincerely for your v[er]y kind and interesting letter. I write in fact merely to thank you, for I have nothing else to say. I have lately been working so hard on plants, that I have not had time even to glance at H. Spencer's recent work, + [hardly?] to no more than glance at your last work. But I hope before long to find more time. It is, however, a great misfortune for me that reading now tires me more than writing, -- that is if the subject sets me thinking - I am as great an admirer as any man can be of H. Spencer's genius; but his deductive style of putting almost everything never satisfies me + the conclusion which I [eventually?] draw is that "here is a grand suggestion for many years work."

Your last work must have cost you v[er]y much labour + therefore I infer that you are [strong?] + well. -I can [assure?] you that I have by no means forgotten my short + v[er]y pleasant interview with you.-Believe me, my dear sir

Yours sincerely  
Ch. Darwin