From Classificatory Theories to Social Darwinism 
and Western Manipulation in the World

Sinflandırma Teorilerin’den Sosyal Darvinizm’e 
Dünyada Batı Hegemonyası

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Abstract: In order to understand how the expansion of an empire means more than geographical expansion, the whole process of both the eighteenth century classificatory system and nineteenth century Social Darwinism should be taken into account. We must therefore consider how the European viewed the non-European as the wild and ‘the other’; how they legitimised the idea of the white man’s superiority over ‘the other’. Only then can some certain texts written under the influence of such thinking be perceived in a wider scope with certain causes and results as well. Such thinking regarding ‘the other’ related both to the scientific classification system of the eighteenth century and to Social Darwinism as the prevailing ideology of the late nineteenth century milieu. Therefore, the primary goal of this article is to clarify how such western thinking was first moulded and then galvanized through scientific proofs to make the idea of the inferiority of the non-European “other” common among Europeans.

Keywords: Classification, Social-Darwinism, empire, ‘the other’


Anahtar Sözcükler: Sinflandırma, Sosyal-Darvinizm, imparatorluk, ‘öteki’

After the main steps taken in the sixteenth century with several discoveries in distant lands; the seventeenth century was, undoubtedly, the most determining period for Western and particularly, British imperialism. Therefore, the significance of the seventeenth century in terms of its providing a convenient basis for the establishment of a more self-aware and even more systematised British Empire requires no affirmation. In other words, the idea of a civilizing mission, the moral superiority of the white race, mercantilism and the use of martial force to triumph over new lands and to offer safety for the territories already occupied, were all fully-defined in the seventeenth century. According to P. J. Marshall (1998), during the period between 1689 and 1815, “both the area and the number of people under British rule increased greatly.”

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Therefore, the changing nature of attitudes towards race in the late nineteenth century period was basically constructed upon the idea that there must be permanent racial divisions. The optimistic assumption that human nature was everywhere identical, and that generous governance might transform barbaric cultures, also began to decline. And in place of this optimism, Victorian people began to think more negatively about a racial world elsewhere. In sum, late nineteenth century thinking about race tended to shift from the construction of a hierarchy of societies based on differences in culture to the invention of a hierarchy based on differences in race. This new outlook of the collective consciousness became a prime subject matter in the scholarship of the late nineteenth century. For instance, Robert Knox, who posited sub-racial divisions by national origin types, considered English Anglo-Saxons superior to all others and attributed all historical change to racial inequality (Blake, 1989, 91).

Furthermore, “human-zoos”, during which various human beings were presented in cages during colonial exhibitions, manipulated western thinking to a large extent and fostered racism at a high pace. Thus, human zoos became an important means of supporting “popular racism”, while being at the same time an object of anthropology; those zoos were sometimes called “ethnographic exhibitions” or even “Negro villages” (91). The display of human beings in cages to demonstrate scientific racist theories became so common in the second half of the nineteenth century only after European-oriented classificatory systems -mentioned above- established a proper background. For instance, the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris had a “Negro Village” where 400 indigenous people were displayed. Moreover, Carl Hagenbeck, a German merchant, exhibited ‘Samoans’ with wild animals in 1874. Yet this was not all, since Madison Grant, as the head of the New York Zoological Society (Tucker, 2002, 54), exhibited Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy, at the Bronx Zoo in New York City in 1906, alongside apes and other animals. When this Congolese pygmy, named Ota Benga, was placed in a cage with an orangutan and labelled as “The Missing Link” by Grant, Grant intended to illustrate in evolutionary terms that Africans were like Ota Benga and were closer to apes than were Europeans (54).

Social evolutionism, influenced by the biological theory of evolution, represented an attempt to formalize social thinking along scientific lines. As for those ethnographic zoos, it should be particularly noted, emphasised the growing belief that indigenous people, particularly Africans, were placed in a scale somewhere between the great apes and human beings of European descent (54). At this point it is also worth citing historian Pascal Blanchard’s (2005) words that, referring to ‘human zoos’, attempted to clarify how the so-called superiority of the Aryan race and its colonial discourse were moulded and thereby legitimised:

_Human zoos, the incredible symbols of the colonial period and the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth century, have been completely suppressed in our collective history and memory. Yet they were major social events. The English, the French, Europeans and Americans came in their tens of millions to discover the ‘savage’ for the first time in zoos or ethnographic’ and colonial fairs. These exhibitions of the exotic (the future ‘native’) laid the foundations on which, over an almost sixty-year period, was spun the West’s progressive transitions from a ‘scientific’ racism to a colonial and ‘mass’ racism’ affecting millions of ‘visitors’ from Paris to Hamburg, London to New York, Moscow to Barcelona (Tucker, 2002, 19)._

Such ethnographic zoos were often attributed to unilinealism, a version of Social Darwinism (Poliakov, 1974, 340). Social Darwinism, basically speaking, was composed of many competing theories by various sociologists and anthropologists, who believed that Western culture was the contemporary apex of social evolution. Famous thinkers of the age such as Thomas
Malthus (1766-1834), Francis Galton (1822-1911), Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) supported the idea that Western culture was the contemporary pinnacle of social evolution (341). As is now well known, the concepts of “survival of the fittest” and “natural selection” explain the two major mechanisms of Darwinism that drive human cultural, social, and political evolution. Moreover, these concepts later began to be interpreted by the Social Darwinists to justify the exploitation, domination, and subordination of other races qualified as inferior. According to them, nations and races were engaged in a struggle for survival in which only the fittest would survive. Being one of those Social Darwinists, and also a naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace in 1864 put forth his own theory regarding the European superiority in the following words:

_The intellectual and moral, as well as the physical qualities of the European are superior; the same power and capacity which have made him rise in a few centuries from the condition of a wandering savage ... to his present state of cultural advance ... enable him when in contact with savage man to conquer in the struggle for existence and to increase at his expense_ (Perry, 2008, 623).

It can be deduced from Wallace’s declaration that Social Darwinism provided a moral justification for the domination and exploitation of man by man, thereby regarding domination and exploitation as the natural right of the superior race. These Social Darwinists employed a war of physical, economic, cultural, and psychological blockage against a cross section of mankind. Colonialism and imperialism became major manifestations of this battle against others. Such battles have always occurred in human history, but now by mid-century during the 1800s, the West had a scientific explanation for such centuries-old human conduct. As Perry (2008) argues, “When European statesmen gathered in Berlin in 1884 to officially partition Africa among themselves, they were fully consumed by this spirit of racial superiority. This was why they made it an obligation to “civilize” the “primitive” Africans” (Perry, 2008, 614).

From the Social Darwinist perspective, it was natural for African and American lands to be invaded for western economic enterprise. It was natural for the natives to be humiliated, enslaved, and killed in capitalist mines and on plantations. Social Darwinism reduced the indigenous peoples to a plain object, what historian Walter Rodney (1982) calls “a specimen” worthy of examination under a microscope (Rodney, 1982, 294). The full implication of Social Darwinism was that it was ‘unnatural’ to be African, American Indian, Asiatic or briefly any non-European and if nature made the mistake of creating such ‘inferior races’, their role was to carry the ‘white man’s burden’. With the growing influence of Social Darwinism, therefore, both the representation of the indigenous peoples as such as inferior to the civilized white man and also the idea of evolution concerning ‘natural selection’ began to be dealt with in the magazines of the period. Below the cartoon by J. B. Patridge (1893) published in “Punch”, depicts the heyday of Social Darwinism; a dialogue between a British tourist and a “Negro waiter” is ironically represented. The allusions in the cartoon can be considered to be taking place in two dimensions. The first is that of a social scale: “the black” deserves to be inferior; hence, his only role is to serve. The second dimension concerns evolution; that is, the British tourist orders a quail and is served a pig’s foot. Therefore, although the perplexed tourist complains about the order as he thinks it was mistaken, the waiter insists on its being a quail, suggesting an evolution in his thinking:
REFERENCES


