

Charles Darwin: Breaking the chain

To be Aboriginal in Australia today is to be classified according to race, wendy brady argues.

photograph
Peter Eve

below
Wendy Brady

We are continually engaged in justifying our rights as Indigenous people or disproving the fallacies of racism. The classifying of humanity began long before Charles Darwin wrote "On the Origin of Species". Hierarchies of race were in place and for Aboriginal Australians we had already been allocated our place at the lowest link of the "Great Chain of Being".

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The "Great Chain of Being" had its origins in ancient Greece and by the Renaissance it was a divine plan. God was at the top and each link down the chain became less perfect. Charles Darwin was aware of this taxonomy but saw it as a line of descent from a few select beings. Darwin still had God as the Creator, but the divine

plan now had natural selection influencing "progress towards perfection" (Darwin 1859. *On the Origin of Species*).

When "On the Origin of Species" was published, its focus was flora and fauna, however, it provided an opportunity for those who believed in a hierarchy of races to misconstrue it as justification for imperialism and colonisation of Indigenous nations. Herbert Spencer, who had pre-empted Darwin on natural selection, advanced his interpretation of Social-Darwinism by emphasising competition as the key to the fittest surviving.

Under pressure to expand his theories on natural selection Darwin, in "The Descent of Man" (1882), noted that colonisation brought with it disease, ill health, death, and a decline in living conditions for Indigenous nations. Being a man of his time he believed that "civilised races can certainly resist changes in their habits". Unfortunately, his conclusions were distorted and misunderstood. In Australia the interpretation was that Aboriginal people were less fit than the colonising population. Their answer was to civilise and Christianise Aboriginal Australians.

Governments moved to put in place Boards of Protection to save us from our fate and to "smooth the dying pillow", assuming we would not survive. The NSW Aborigines Protection Act of 1909 gave their Board power of "in loco parentis", thus classifying every Aboriginal person as a child whether they were adult or not.

The influence of Social-Darwinism underpinned Australian state and federal government legislation and continues to do so. The Stolen Generations were a result of the false belief that the removal of Aboriginal children was to "protect" them from being Aboriginal and to assimilate them into the dominant culture to ensure their survival. As it appeared to them "a cross with civilised races at once gives to aboriginal race immunity from the evil consequences of changed conditions" (Darwin 1882. *The Descent of Man*).

Many Australians still hold that unawareness of the consequences of colonisation. Those who have continued to assimilate, rehabilitate, indoctrinate, incarcerate, co-ordinate, dominate and legislate on our behalf, have not moved closer to "perfection". Indigenous knowledges are now sought to help solve the effects of colonisation, such as climate change to assist the survival of the natural world. The ability of Aboriginal people to survive in spite of colonisation is indisputable. Unlike the mantra of US President Barack Obama, it is not "yes we can", it is "yes we do" and although we may not be the fittest, we definitely survive.

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