Notes of a Native 'Yinzer:'
Social Darwinism and Philanthropy in Pittsburgh's Gilded Ages –
Survival of the Richest?

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This essay grew out of a public presentation made in early 2009 at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pa., which, as part of the university's celebration of Darwin Days, marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Because I previously had written about Social Darwinism and, by way of Andrew Carnegie, its putative connections to Pittsburgh, I was asked to provide a broad historical overview of the philosopher, Herbert Spencer, generally acknowledged to have linked Darwin and Carnegie, and to situate these three figures within the larger context of America's two Gilded Ages.

To make sense out of Darwin, Spencer, and Carnegie and the history associated with them, particularly in Pittsburgh, struck me as a daunting task. So much has been written about these three

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1 In Pittsburgh, and throughout much of Southwestern Pennsylvania, "yinz" is often used as the second-person plural pronoun. Linguists have traced the probable origins of "yinz" to Scots-Irish immigrants and their movement from Irish, which distinguishes between a singular and plural second-person pronoun, to modern English, which does not. In the American South, the linguistic equivalent of "yinz" is "y'all:" in much of New Jersey, "yous" serves a similar function. The use of these pronouns has been interpreted as a sign of ignorance, whereas in fact it represents the residual trace of a linguistic distinction that existed in English, as well, into the Seventeenth Century, i.e., "thou" and "ye." "Yinzer" has been used as a pejorative term describing persons who speak the dialect of Pittsburgh and environs; it also has become a mark of considerable regional pride. Resources that address these matters may be found through http://english.cmu.edu/pittsburghspeech/index.html and http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/pittsburghese/. Also of interest is "TNY/The New Yinzer," at http://www.newyinzer.com/.


3 Many thanks to Prof. David Lampe of the biology department at Duquesne, to the university itself and, for their help in bringing me to Pittsburgh, to the United Steelworkers, the Laborers’ District Council of Western Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Labor Education Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
figures that I had a hard time figuring out where to begin. And my own history, particularly as a native Pittsburgher, initially seemed to complicate the task at hand.

But I ultimately decided that my own history was an appropriate, if paradoxical, point of entry. For my history with Carnegie and his philanthropy in Pittsburgh begins in a way that is familiar to anyone who has grown up in one of the thousands of venues that has a Carnegie Library or Museum.

I harbor vivid, happy memories of childhood visits to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh – above all to see the skeletal Tyrannosaurus Rex in the Hall of Dinosaurs; of hours in the children’s department of the Carnegie Library, browsing the shelves of the sports section or sitting, impatiently, on the floor for the read-out-loud sessions; and of multiple visits to the library’s central desk, where I would return mountains of unread books, pay a whopping fine, and try not to look at the librarian who, I believed, must have memorized my entire record and was preparing a report to send me off to what Pittsburghers in the 1950s called “Juvenile Hall.”

Some years later, when I was home from college at Christmas break, I found myself back in the Carnegie Library in Oakland, despite unresolved fears about Carnegie librarians, reading for the first time Darwin’s On The Origin of Species. It must have taken five days, and the library seemed monumental enough to help me focus in a way that this monumental work demanded. It was a way that was new to me, one that required the following of an intricate argument based on evidence and carefully drawn inference; one that forced me, for the first time, to appreciate the conundrum of proving the general by investigating the particular, all the while acknowledging that the particular could make no sense without a theory that explained the general.

This is what literary critics and philosophers call the hermeneutic circle and, in my view, there is no better text than Darwin’s through which to appreciate the shared problems and methods of the
humanities and the sciences. In any case, as best I recall, I wrote a pretty good paper about *The Origin*; in writing this essay, I have wished that I had preserved my undergraduate effort.

But my ties to Carnegie and to the history I am about to consider are deeper, personally and intellectually, than fond recollections of working in his signature library. Only one of my immigrant grandparents ever directly depended on steelmaking for a weekly wage, but all of them, as well as their children – my parents – owed their livelihoods to what seemed to be, through the 1950s, the eternal activity of Pittsburgh’s steel mills. My father, a physician, and my mother, a social worker, could not have sent me to the schools that shaped my vision of the world – most notably, Shady Side Academy and Haverford College – were it not for such activity. My father and my uncle Seymoure, also a physician, appreciated the indebtedness of our extended families with a love and tenacity that I could not fathom as a young man; long after work in the mills began to disappear, and as Braddock seemed to turn into a kind of ghost town – into “a place that capitalism left behind,” as one Pitt professor recently put it⁴ – they maintained their office on Braddock Avenue. It was across the street from my grandfather’s moribund clothing store, just a few blocks from the Carnegie Library of Braddock and the entrance to the Edgar Thomson Steel Works.

I would venture that many readers – at least many of a certain age – could offer similar personal accounts. Of course the stories would differ in the details. But all of us, even those who were not privileged to be born in Pittsburgh, are personally and intellectually bound up with the complex and paradoxical history of the steel city and of its steel mills, just as we are bound up with the complex and paradoxical history of the steel city and of its steel mills, just as we are bound up with the complex and paradoxical history of the steel city and of its steel mills, just as we are bound up with the complex and paradoxical history of the steel city and of its steel mills, just as we are bound up with the complex and

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paradoxical history of its most famous son and his benefactions, libraries included, whatever we may make of them.

It is questions associated with such benefactions and their history, questions about the accumulation of wealth, about individual and public rights, and about philanthropy in the past – and present – that I want to consider in this essay. I cannot pretend to have answers to very many of these questions, but I do think that it is important to raise, or re-raise, them.

Some of these questions began to take shape in the 1960s at Shady Side Academy, behind the Thomas Alexander Mellon Gates (more about Mr. Gates later), and in the classrooms underwritten by Mr. Mellon’s extended family. In one of them, I studied U.S. History under the careful supervision of Robert D. Abercrombie, who about fifteen years earlier had taught the gifted historian David McCullough.5 In this essay I wish to explore a set of questions which have remained largely unexamined, in and well beyond Pittsburgh, by historians, such as Mr. McCullough, who typically have been most interested in America’s “heroic” past. This is a past that inevitably leads to a brighter, and better, and more progressive present.

The presentation of this past is usually not very complicated; it tries to avoid the paradoxical and ambiguous. It is the history of the History Channel, of “The American Experience,” of Ken Burns and of Shelby Steele, of PBS and of the Carnegie Corporation, and indeed of Andrew Carnegie himself. Over the last few decades, it often has been delivered by the sonorous, reassuring voice of Mr. McCullough.6

5 Mr. McCullough is the author of a number of popular works, including John Adams (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), which won the Pulitzer prize.

6 Between 1991 and 2006, McCullough narrated at least 23 episodes for the PBS series, “The American Experience.” Additionally, as series host, he provided the introduction for “Andrew Carnegie: The Richest Man in the World” (1997), on which I served as a consultant for PBS. McCullough also was the narrator of Ken Burns’s tremendously successful, deeply flawed, nine-part PBS production, “The Civil War” (1990). On McCullough’s ventures, a good point of departure is http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/mccullough/index.html.
Some of the questions I want to highlight deeply engaged the opponents of Andrew Carnegie and his allies in the late decades of the 19th Century. Thousands of these opponents lived and worked in Braddock; they also lived, across the Monongahela River, in Homestead and on the South Side, where my maternal grandparents built their lives on Carson Street.

Curiously, perhaps, the voices of Carnegie’s opponents have proven more difficult to hear than Carnegie’s. Just why this is so constitutes a vexing historical and political problem in its own right, perhaps especially for someone who has written a book about Homestead that offered some criticism of Carnegie. I therefore also want to share a few thoughts about this issue.

My hope is that the financial panic that began in 2008 may work to unplug our ears. But I am not very optimistic about this, for the mythical Carnegie, master of generous stimulus packages, continues to be one sly and cagey dude, seemingly existing beyond interrogation, as do so many of the foundational figures and animating ideas of American culture.

For the truth is that the master, heroic narratives which at once shaped Carnegie and which he shaped – the master narratives of upward mobility and the unfettered pursuit of wealth; of enlightened philanthropy, self-interest, and competition; of the survival of the fittest, the genius and necessary justice of the market, and of necessarily unending progress – these narratives are so deeply embedded in popular culture that most of us find it hard to question them. Indeed, I would argue that they are so deeply embedded that we find it hard even to consider the possibility that they are narratives – narratives which serve a purpose – and that there may be alternate narratives and categories of analysis which we, and those who have come before us, may have suppressed, wittingly or not.7

So consider this essay as an exercise in the critical examination of some of our master narratives, an effort to tell parts of a largely untold story and to unsilence a portion of our past. In some ways, I

7 On these points, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
have taken my cues from Mr. Abercrombie, though I do not think he would be entirely happy with what I want to say. But it was in his classroom at Shady Side where I first read Richard Hofstadter’s The American Political Tradition. I think that I have learned a lot from this modest, little book, one whose pivotal essay linked the lives and thinking of Andrew Carnegie to Abraham Lincoln – and not to Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. This connection the author made just a few years after publishing his influential, Social Darwinism in American Thought, which has resisted multiple scholarly efforts to displace it as the meta-commentary on what Hofstadter saw as the pervasive influence of Darwin and Spencer on this side of the Atlantic. But even in that book, Hofstadter was careful to dissociate the thinking of Darwin and Spencer, and to explain that Americans imported the latter’s doctrines on what we call Social Darwinism “long after individualism had become a national tradition.”

Reduced to a skeletal narrative, then, my argument goes like this:

That Darwin may be held accountable for our privileging competitive individualism, its ugly Gilded-Age partners, racism and imperialism, as well as more modern iterations of America’s particular riffs on these grand themes of Western history, is problematic. Whereas the influence of Carnegie’s thought and actions in the national life of the United States remains considerable, and perhaps never more so than during the current, second flowering of American philanthropy and individualism, Carnegie’s indebtedness both to Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer is far less certain. But Carnegie, for his part, directly confronted a question that neither Darwin nor Spencer seems to have broached: whether capitalism and egalitarian democracy might be reconciled. Carnegie’s answer – philanthropy

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8 Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, p. 48.
9 On this, see the important new study by Adrian Desmond and James Moore, Darwin’s Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin’s Views on Human Evolution (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).
10 On this and related matters, see Robert Green McCloskey, American Conservatism In the Age of Enterprise, 1865-1910 (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), pp. 127-67. Also of interest is Robert C.
– stands as his greatest “gift,” one that has yet to be supplanted – not to mention properly interrogated – even as America, and the world at large, continues to wrestle with this fundamental dilemma of modernity. Embedded in the dilemma is another, and one that neither Carnegie nor his contemporary equivalents can bare to acknowledge: the possibility that private right, particularly the private right to accumulate and profit in the competitive marketplace, may interfere or indeed abrogate certain public rights.

Which rights?

First, the right to work – a right which Carnegie’s opponents, much to his befuddlement in the Homestead Lockout of 1892, identified as fundamental. Carnegie himself had endorsed this right, cynically in the mid-1880s, prior to trampling on it, in Braddock and then in Homestead itself. 11

Second, the right to live in dignity and health – a right which no less a personage than Bill Gates has identified as a universal human right, and a right which tens of thousands of 19th-century working people claimed as theirs. They called this right a “competence,” that is, a sufficiency of means for living a life of material security and personal dignity.

And third, and most important, there is our collective right to planetary existence – a right which stands in jeopardy because of the environmental and geo-political threats posed by unregulated and unbridled industrial growth, be it directed by individuals or by groups of individuals, that is, by corporations. To me it seems axiomatic that such a right exists, and I would point to Darwin’s grand and Godless scheme as offering supporting evidence. But Darwin offered no assurance that organisms who had “descended” the evolutionary tree – humans among them – would, in the end, prove “fit” enough to survive.


11 The questions raised in this and in the succeeding paragraph are addressed in Krause, Homestead, passim.
While the jury remains out on the question of human survival, the stakes, however, are clear enough. For unlike the demise of the Tyrannosaurus and his cousins in Carnegie’s Dinosaur Hall in Pittsburgh, our leave-taking raises the specter of a global holocaust, whether it evolves from the putative success our species has enjoyed in populating – over-populating – the planet, or from the poisons we have generated as by-products of our efforts to sustain the species and, by the way, of selectively enriching some individuals and groups who belong to it.

If, like so many commentators, we attribute to Darwin and to Spencer the lethal notion that private, individual right not only trumps the public right but that the pursuit of the private, individual right magically redounds to the public right and good, we can easily mistake the extent to which the notion is so deeply ingrained in our culture. Blame Darwin or Spencer – or Carnegie, for that matter, or even Bill Gates – and we ignore just how fundamental is the problem that we must confront.

This is, at bottom, what Richard Hofstadter was getting at in The American Political Tradition.

Let me explain:

Born of Hofstadter’s capacious understanding of the tragic and paradoxical, and overlaid with post-WWII resignation and personal despair, the book pointed to a dark underbelly of the American past which, Hofstadter argued, privileged the rights of property and the propertied individual, often at the expense of the common good. In the book’s pivotal essay, on Abraham Lincoln and the self-made

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12 Though universally celebrated as an prose stylist, Hofstadter has been misunderstood by both the right and left, the former for what many of that persuasion consider his ties to Marxist analysis, the latter for his putative hand in the creation and celebration of what was called “consensus history.” But in truth, The American Political Tradition rejects facile categorization: Hofstadter clearly understood many of the big problems that have bedeviled Americans, and he was much too clever, and democratic, to buy into the dead-end solutions of authoritarianism. By the time he wrote his Pulitzer-Prize winning study of American Populism, The Age of Reform, however, he did believe that ordinary Americans, evidently hoodwinked by Joseph McCarthy, always had been hoodwinked. There are hints of this sort of condescension in The American Political Tradition, and I would say that they surfaced because Hofstadter was, almost exclusively, what might be called an historian of mainstream American political
myth, Hofstadter argued that the political culture of what we now call our first Gilded Age – that is, the period when Andrew Carnegie became Andrew Carnegie – was rooted in antebellum thought, politics, and economics, and specifically in a generalized ethos holding that “hard work, frugality, temperance and a touch of ability applied long and hard enough would lift a man into the propertied or professional class and give him independence and respect, if not wealth and prestige. Failure to rise in the economic scale was generally viewed as a fault in the individual, not in society.”13 Bear in mind that this was the United States before the Civil War, before Charles Darwin published his masterwork, and before Social Darwinism is said to have taken hold.

In Hofstadter’s view, there were two Americans whose lives codified this ethos in the 1800s. The first was Lincoln who, as we have been recently and continuously reminded, shares a birthday with Darwin; the second was Carnegie.

For his part, Lincoln fashioned his political career in accord with the compulsions of his own ambition and with the myth of the self-made man – a myth entrenched in American life by this very seductive, self-made career. As Hofstadter explained, Lincoln believed that “given the chance for the frugal, the industrious, and the able… to assert themselves, society would never be divided along fixed lines. There would be no eternal mud-sill class.”14 Most Americans believe this myth today, notwithstanding the obscene inequities of wealth and economic power which mark both Gilded Ages in the United States.

Lincoln explained a part of the myth this way: “There is no permanent class of hired laborers among us…. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account today, and will hire others to for

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13 Hofstadter, American Political Tradition, p.
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him tomorrow. Advancement – improvement in condition – is the order of things in a society of equals.”

Such belief in endless opportunity for the self-made man was the key to Lincoln’s popular appeal, informing above all his opposition to the expansion of slavery: the trans-Mississippi West, after all, was to be set aside for white men where, insulated from persons of color, they could pull themselves up by their bootstraps.¹⁵

In his beliefs of the right, and indeed of the moral obligation of the individual to advance, and that it was individual advancement which underwrote the public good and universal progress, Lincoln shared much with Carnegie. This belief seemed justified by American society in the pre-Civil War years, when upward mobility was a realistic possibility for so many white working men. The road to success for such men was simple, in Lincoln’s view: he called it self-improvement. “The way for a young man to rise,” Lincoln explained, “is to improve himself every way he can” by working and studying hard. Doing so eliminated the prospect of failure.¹⁶ Thomas Alexander Mellon, benefactor of Shady Side Academy the founder of Mellon Bank, put it this way: “The normal condition of man is hard work, self-denial, acquisition, and accumulation.” Lincoln, for his part, once told his law partner, “You have been a laborious, studious young man, (and) “you cannot fail in any laudable object….” Of such assertions, Hofstadter concluded: “If there is a flaw here, Lincoln did not have to meet it.”¹⁷

But Lincoln himself presided over an economic revolution – America’s second industrial revolution – which effectively destroyed the myth he helped create. Were Lincoln to have lived into old age, his view of the political order would have been woefully out of touch with reality. As I often tell my

¹⁵ American Political Tradition, pp. 131-36. Lincoln’s enduring negrophobia also was central to his success, as Hofstadter explained, but a discussion of Lincoln’s racialized, and gendered, politics will have to wait for another time.

¹⁶ APT, pp.

students, a speech by Lincoln about today’s struggling worker becoming tomorrow’s successful businessman in the Depression-ravaged Pittsburgh of the 1870s – a decade which concluded with a national strike that left scores of workers shot and killed in the city’s “Roundhouse Riot” – such a speech would have been met by derisive laughter. No classes in America? “A society of equals?” The words of Thomas A. Scott, the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad and Carnegie’s dear friend and mentor, are telling. Starving workers, Scott said, should try “a rifle diet for a few days and see how they like that kind of bread.”

Hofstadter summed up his view of Lincoln, whom he directly linked to Carnegie, and the era which supplanted his, by arguing that, had Lincoln “lived to 70, he would have seen the generation brought up on self help come into its own, build oppressive corporations, and begin to close off opportunities. And his own beloved (Republican) party would become the jackal of vested interests, placing the dollar far ahead of the man – which Lincoln vowed he would never do. Booth’s bullet spared him from all this and confined his life to an age that gave honest sanction to the compromises of his thought.” For a man whose ambition was an engine that knew no rest – of course the same could be said of Carnegie – assassination allowed escape from the unsolvable tragedies of the Republic gone recklessly amok in the 1870s. Carnegie was not so lucky, and he spent the final years of his life in a depression-induced silence.

While the careers of Lincoln and Carnegie dramatized what Hofstadter characterized as an “inhumanly individualistic” view of society, he did not venture an explicit assessment of any “compromises” informing Carnegie’s post-Civil War life and whether the Gilded Age might have

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19 Nasaw, Carnegie, p., and Nasaw’s speech/interview with at Carnegie Hall.
bestowed an honest sanction upon them. But in fundamental ways, this is the very question which troubled Carnegie about himself and which has troubled Carnegie’s panegyrists and most astute biographers alike, from Burton Hendrick to Joseph Frasier Wall and David Nasaw. This question, and related ones, continue to baffle us: Is there some way to reconcile Carnegie’s ruthless individualism and the pursuit of the main chance with his philanthropy? Is there a way to reconcile the inevitable inequities that arise in a social order based on the competitive values of the marketplace and self-interest with the American belief in equality?

For those who have considered the life and work of Andrew Carnegie, there are two narratives, or legends, that typically come into play in confronting such questions. The first is the legend of the cutthroat businessman and robber baron. The second is of the philanthropist extraordinaire who honored America by underwriting libraries, music halls, museums, and universities. Most Americans have tended to regard these two legends as contradictory and mutually exclusive. Indeed, virtually all written interpretations of Carnegie's philanthropy have followed a similar rhetorical strategy of “yes, but.” Yes, Carnegie was a robber baron, but he also was a cultural benefactor. As one critic put it in the 1980s: “Aggressive, ruthless, and no friend of the unions, Carnegie was nevertheless a robber baron with a difference.” For all of his failings and despotism, this critic wrote, Carnegie was a genuine philanthropist; moreover, his gestures of philanthropy somehow redeemed whatever questionable activities he engaged in as a businessman. This is the same argument David Nasaw seems to have pursued in his recent biography. As Nasaw explains, even before Homestead tarnished Carnegie’s reputation as a friend of American workers, he had decided to dispense with his fortune through philanthropy. And he did so, Nasaw argues, not out of shame or guilt, and not to atone for his sins, but

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“simply” because he wanted to return “his fortune to the larger community where it rightfully belonged.”

I would argue, instead, that Carnegie fully appreciated the glaring social and political contradictions which his life helped define and moreover that he understood that the great problem of his day was not, as he titled his famous essay, “wealth,” but rather inequality. Necessary progress and philanthropy, he believed, would fix everything. He anchored this belief in his somewhat shaky understanding of philosophy – specifically, the philosophy of Herbert Spencer.

Spencer, born in Derby, in England, in 1820, and generally credited as the inventor of the phrase, “survival of the fittest,” published his first book, Social Statics, in 1851. In it, he argued with characteristic optimism that humans soon would progress to the point of adapting so well to living in society that there would be no need for a state. This sense of progress, of a necessarily evolutionary progress, informed virtually the entire corpus of Spencer’s writing, most of which was published over a thirty-year period and labeled, A System of Synthetic Philosophy. This work sought to integrate the natural and social sciences and to organize it in accord with Spencer’s principles of evolution – principles which held that all worldly phenomena could be explained by a necessary movement of “homogeneous” and simple organisms, inherently unstable, to increasingly complex and “heterogeneous forms,” and that such movement was evolutionary and progressive.

Spencer grounded his sense of biological evolution in the Lamarckian theory of acquired characteristics; he also differed from Darwin in privileging the human species over others by suggesting that we represent the pinnacle of the evolutionary process. In the realm of politics, Spencer saw humans as possessing a natural inclination to do what was necessary to preserve their lives by exercising their

21 Krause, Homestead, pp. ; Nasaw, p. x; NYPL talk; Simon Pepper, “A Department Store of Learning,” Times Literary Supplement, May 9, 1986.

22 Spencer,
rational self-interest; Western industrial society, with complex and “heterogeneous” forms and divisions of labor, embodied the fullest expression of this universally beneficent self-interest. As for those who, for some reason, fell by the wayside in industrial society, no rational person could identify his self-interest by way of extending a helping hand.

Why? For purely moral reasons, as the entire universe, not to mention Western society and its markets, were governed by what Spencer called “beneficent necessity.” In prose that might have been penned a century later by speechwriters for Margaret Thatcher or her crony, Ronald Reagan, Spencer proclaimed: “It seems hard that a labourer incapacitated by sickness from competing with his stronger fellows should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately, but in connection with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of the highest beneficence – the same beneficence that brings to early graves the children of diseased parents, and singles out the low-spirited, the intemperate, and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic.” Such lowlifes – Spencer termed them the imbecilic, slow, unhealthy, and faithless – would be “excreted” by society even in eras of non-epidemic well-being, and no one, and no government, should interfere with such excretion. Suffering was necessary, and philanthropy – private alms or public welfare – might be applied, but in the end such measures would work merely to exacerbate suffering by encouraging laziness.23

As David Nasaw has explained, Carnegie was quite happy to reduce the wages of his employees prior to having read Spencer; Carnegie “did not need Spencer to teach him how to be a capitalist.” But Spencer did prove “indispensible… in providing Carnegie with a moral imperative for his actions.” And Spencer sanctioned Carnegie’s belief that he himself was an agent of progress and that those who stood in his way – the way of progress – were worthy objects of his outrage. “Before Spencer,” Carnegie was

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23 Spencer, Social Statics, pp. 354-56, also quoted in Nasaw, Carnegie, p. 251
fond of saying, “all for me had been darkness, after him, all had become light – and right.” This assertion Carnegie made despite his disagreement with Spencer on the question of state intervention and on the importance of philanthropy itself.  

Carnegie was, in fact, confused about Spencer, arguing at one juncture that, contrary to Spencer’s schemata, the world moved from the heterogeneous to the homogenous. If Carnegie was confused by Spencer, we should perhaps avoid quick judgments: the philosopher William James parodied Spencer’s understanding of evolution with this gloss: it “is a change from a nohowish untalkaboutable all-alikeness to a somehowish and in general talkaboutable not-all-alikeness by continuous sticktogetherations and something elseifications.” This said, it is clear that Carnegie never appreciated what his master wrote and remained ignorant of his most fundamental premise.  

In the end, then, Spencer was probably as irrelevant to Carnegie and his project as he was to the projects of most Gilded-Age entrepreneurs. The virtues of thrift and hard work and industry, the teachings of Ben Franklin – and Abraham Lincoln – spoke more directly to Carnegie and his colleagues than anything Spencer – or Darwin – published. Carnegie, alone perhaps among the great entrepreneurs of the Gilded Age, loved to cite Spencer, but Carnegie would have agreed with his associate, Thomas Mellon, whose name graces the gates of my high school alma mater, when he declared that Ben Franklin’s autobiography identified the values that made possible a life of wealth and fame. Just how rooted Carnegie and his cohort were in the political economy of antebellum America may be gleaned from the following words:

“I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance

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25 Nasaw, p. 252; Wall, p. 381 and 394-95.

26 Wall and Bannister
to get rich with everybody else. When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life. I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flatboat – just what might happen to any poor man's son. I want every man to have a chance – and I believe a black man is entitled to it – in which he can better his condition – when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him. That is the true system. I want you to have a clean bed and no snakes in it! Then you can better your condition, and so it may go on and on in one ceaseless round so long as man exists on the face of the earth.”

Work hard – get ahead in “the race of life” – better your condition – and on it goes, ceaselessly, so long as we exist. These were the words of Lincoln, and this was his political economy. He did not live to see the ravages of the Great Depression of the 1870s, the state-sanctioned killings of 1877, and the steady, inexorable growth of a permanent class of “wage slaves,” as millions of American workers came to call themselves in the tumultuous 1880s. This was the very status that Carnegie’s mill hands, in Braddock, in Duquesne, and in Homestead, challenged time and again until 300 Pinkertons, dispatched with the full cooperation of Pittsburgh’s leading politicians, along with thousands of National Guardsmen, announced in July, 1892, that, contrary to the beliefs of President Lincoln, there were no more “clean beds” in America but there were plenty of “snakes.” What effectively went “on in one ceaseless round” after that time was anything but the limitless possibility that both Lincoln and Carnegie had envisaged. Carnegie, his inability to comprehend Spencer notwithstanding, fully appreciated this

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fact of modern American life. Giving back to the community – building libraries – was meant to kill the snakes, clean the beds, and permit “the ceaseless round” to lift everyone.

As tenuous as was Carnegie’s link to Spencer, it was even further removed from Darwin, and not only because Darwin, as his most authoritative biographer Janet Browne has shown, went to considerable lengths to distance himself from the philosopher credited with birthing “Social Darwinism.” Darwin made this effort despite his ambivalent feelings concerning his own insertion of the term, “survival of the fittest,” in the fifth edition of the Origin. In truth, Darwin had about as much respect and use for Spencer as did George W. Bush for Ludwig Wittgenstein. Regarding Spencer, with characteristic gentleness and candor Darwin wrote in his Autobiography:

“After reading any of his books I generally feel enthusiastic admiration for his transcendent talents, and have often wondered whether in the distant future he would rank with such great men, as Descartes, Leibnitz, etc., about whom, however, I know very little. Nevertheless, I am not conscious of having profited in my own work by Spencer's writings. His deductive manner of treating any subject is wholly opposed to my frame of mind. His conclusions never convince me: and over and over again I have said to myself, after reading one of his discussions – ‘Here would be a fine subject for half-a-dozen years' work.’ His fundamental generalizations (which have been compared in importance by some persons with Newton's Laws!) – which I daresay may be very valuable under a philosophical point of view, are of such a nature that they do not seem to me to be of any strictly scientific use. They partake more of the nature of definitions than of laws of nature. They do not aid one in predicting what will happen in any particular case. Anyhow they have not been of any use to me.”

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This critical assessment was penned by Darwin, retrospectively, in his Autobiography, but the truth remains that even in the wake of the publication of the Origin, and of Darwin’s emendations of it through the early 1870s, he in fact did have little use for anything offered by Spencer – other than his phrase, “survival of the fittest.” And Darwin always knew that there was a risk involved in the deployment of this term – that even his most careful readers might see in it something more than what he meant, that is, that the criteria of survival was not “fitness” per se, with its attendant moral overtones, but rather adaptability, and that the question of adaptability could not be resolved over the short-term. Survival of the fittest in his view was the survival of the most adaptable, and adaptable always was qualified – by long, long-term history and by the specific location of a given organism, and its group, in nature, in what we call an ecosystem. Precisely when Spencer first used the term, “survival of the fittest,” is a matter of some debate, but it is clear that by 1852 – six years prior to the joint paper on natural selection delivered by Darwin and Alfred Wallace – Spencer had intimated that the survival of species arose from their fecundity. Tellingly, this insight was not grounded in Spencer’s understanding of biological inheritance but in a discourse of political economy shaped by Thomas Malthus, who identified an ubiquitous “struggle for existence” as the driving force of life.30

What is the significance of this?

Darwin’s “revolutionary” book, which of course did alter the way we look at the natural world and our place in it, precipitated no equivalent revolution in economic or social theory. Rather, as the historian Gregory Claeys has suggested, Darwin’s work simply “remapped” an existing structure of political and economic ideas which drew on Malthus, to be sure, but which in a new way, suitable to the late 19th Century, could be mobilized to support the moral rectitude of unfettered individualism and of those persons and societies which had succeeded in accumulating wealth and power. Had Lincoln lived
into the 1870s, perhaps he would have been among those who looked to Darwin, or Spencer, to try to give “honest” sanction to “the compromises of his thought” and to the irreconcilable conflicts of wage earners and businessmen. But Darwin, and indeed Social Darwinism, as a number of scholars have shown, also could be mobilized to criticize such an effort.31

Carnegie, of course, dismissed criticism that located America’s emerging social crisis in its fundamental principles. He was satisfied that a political and economic system based on an ethos of individualism and the lure of upward mobility was both just and necessary. But unlike Spencer, and possibly Darwin, Carnegie learned – was forced to learn – that this system carried with it, and deepened, political and economic inequities. It was this very lesson, according to David Nasaw, that drove Carnegie out of Pittsburgh and to a new mansion in New York City, where, following a brief and disagreeable visit to Braddock with his philosophical mentor, he entertained and courted Spencer at the famous Delmonico’s banquet in 1882. As it turned out, Spencer fooled the assembled businessmen, encouraging them to take life a bit easier, slow down, relax. Carnegie, for one, proclaimed that this was a great message, even as he did not heed it, for he spent the 1880s acquiring and running the great new steel works at Homestead and Duquesne. It was during this decade that he wrote his famous “Gospel of Wealth,” the good news book that sought, through the elixir of philanthropy, to assuage the emerging ills of the era and in effect to contain the consequences of Carnegie’s careless, and possibly compulsive, disregard of the advice he had given himself in 1868.32

That year, when he was 33, Carnegie penned a note that became arguably his most celebrated piece of writing. In it, Carnegie instructed himself to “cast aside business forever...” within two years. “The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry,” he wrote. “(There is) no idol more

32 Barry Werth, Banquet at Delmonico’s
debasing than the worship of money.... To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.”

Carnegie, of course, did not forsake the pursuit of money within two years nor limit his income to the annual maximum of $50,000, as he had announced in his private memo. Nor did he forsake the desire for “making the acquaintance of literary men.” Indeed, at the time he dedicated America's first Carnegie Library, in Braddock, Carnegie counted profits in excess of $3.5 million per year. (By 1899, these profits would reach an annual yield of $40 million.) While it is impossible to imagine the fabulous dimension of equivalent sums today, it is possible to appreciate the troubling contradictions that the amassing of such wealth created for a man of Carnegie's avowed convictions. For he faced a struggle between two powerful impulses: a genuine, if condescending, humanitarianism and an insatiable acquisitiveness that sanctioned, as his biographers have shown, the ruthless pursuit of wealth.

Carnegie did not experience this dilemma alone, but few may have experienced it so intensely. Carnegie struggled toward a solution for 20 years while continuing, in the words of his cautionary note, to “push inordinately” toward the pinnacle of wealth. When he attained it, he destroyed workers’ organizations, and lives, in Braddock and then Homestead, and proceeded to give libraries to both towns. Many of the workers in and beyond the Monongahela Valley remained skeptical of Carnegie’s philanthropy, and in the 33 years that Carnegie bestowed libraries in the Anglo-American world, 225

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33 Photo duplication, ACLC, vol.3. Carnegie's note is reprinted in Wall, Carnegie, 224-25, and McCloskey, American Conservatism, 144. See also Krause, Homestead, p.

34 James Howard Bridge, The Inside History of the Carnegie Steel Company: A Romance Of Millions (New York:1903), 294-95. For some of the points in this paragraph and the succeeding one, I have drawn on McCloskey, American Conservatism, pp. 145-47.
communities rejected his largesse. Not surprisingly, this sentiment was especially strong in Pennsylvania: 20 of the 46 towns Carnegie solicited said “No.”35

As I have argued elsewhere, Carnegie’s philanthropy and ferocious self-interest are not mutually exclusive; Carnegie derived both from a single coherent system of belief that underlay his ambitious agenda for modern America, an agenda that he repeatedly spelled out in no uncertain terms in his writings. Carnegie's initiatives in the world of business, together with his published statements on wealth, progress, and democracy, suggest that his cultural benefactions and industrial despotism were informed by a shared logic. Simply put, his is not a narrative of “yes, a robber baron, but a benefactor,” but rather “yes a robber baron and a benefactor.” The activities of these two personae ought to be examined together in the context of Carnegie's larger intellectual and social agenda. For “both” Carnegie were intent on achieving a single, overarching goal: in the name of a “morality of improvement” and an unwavering faith in progress, Carnegie sought nothing less than full control over the instruments of material and cultural production in America. His conscious strivings toward what can only be called hegemony point to the indissoluble ties between two forms of activity – economic and cultural – typically considered to constitute separate realms of human endeavor. When Carnegie advised his fellow millionaires to dispense with their wealth, he did not urge them to dispense with their power, and he no doubt calculated that his philanthropy was a sound investment in his power. 36

It was left to the Andrew Carnegie of the South, to the man who built his industrial empire not on his country’s need for and infatuation with steel, but rather its need for and infatuation with cigarettes –


36 On the “morality of improvement,” Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (Oxford:1973). This ethos, which informed the discourse of the great industrialists of the nineteenth century, held that the pursuit of self-interest and economic advantage was not only “rational,” but universally beneficent.
James Buchanan Duke – to articulate the precise nature of the relationship between professional gift-giving and plutocratic power. Not long after he created the endowment which bears his name, Duke, who presided over the South’s largest hydroelectric company, and a mini-empire of cotton mills and railroads, as well as the American Tobacco Company, declared that, at long last, the Duke fiefdoms were secure from public criticism and state power. “Reckon all this will last now,” Duke confided to a former reporter for *The (Raleigh) News & Observer*. “What I mean is, I’ve got ‘em fixed now so they won’t bother this thing I’m leaving…. There won’t be any more meddling with it by legislatures and courts and newspapers like I’ve been bothered all my life. But I’ve got ‘em now, and it’s going on making profits. Not even Joe Daniels will cuss me now.”

Daniels, whose grandson, Frank, employed me as a reporter before I embarked upon my graduate training at James Duke’s university, for decades had been an outspoken critic of the “man who taught the world to smoke.” But Duke was right: his philanthropy effectively muzzled Daniels and so many other North Carolina progressives. Josephus Daniels’ former reporter Ben Dixon MacNeill, paraphrased Duke’s thinking as follows:

“Public thinking and public attitudes toward private business, (Duke) explained, are determined primarily by lawyers who dominate government; by preachers who dominate religion; by doctors who dominate life and death. Duke University would have the outstanding medical school of the South, and hard by would be a great school of theology and another of the law. It was simple enough. Here were the sources of public opinion. The university would take care of them.”

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37 The quotations in this and in the succeeding two paragraphs are from Ben Dixon MacNeill, “Duke,” *The American Mercury* 17 (August 1929), pp. 438 and . Josephus Daniels was the owner and editor of *The News & Observer* from the Progressive Era into the 1920s.
As I hope it has become clear, the insertion of personal history at the beginning of this essay, and near its end, is not innocent. I have been educated in libraries, schools, and universities that are steeped in, and indeed owe their existence to, the very values I have spent a career in criticizing. I love these institutions; to them, I owe much of whatever intellectual autonomy I may claim; my debts to Andrew Carnegie, to the Mellons, and to Buck Duke are large, and I suspect many readers have incurred similar arrears. But I have other debts and obligations, and one point of this essay is to ask readers if they, too, may have similar ones.

To the steelworkers who refused to be muzzled by Andrew Carnegie and to America’s blind faith in individual ambition, we also may owe something. And as we survey the economic and political landscape at what I hope is the end of another era of de-regulation and unbridled laissez-faire, perhaps we may even have something to learn from them. Listen to what the steelworker James Boyce said in the wake of the Pinkerton assault on Homestead:

“The people outside do not understand this Homestead position. Most of us, expecting continuous employment here, have put our savings into homes, which will be lost if we are to be driven away from this town. The Carnegie mills were built up by us, the great profits of the concern were made by us. Our labor was expended for Scotch castles, and library advertising. We do not say that Carnegie… does not own the mill property, but we do say that we have some rights in it ourselves.”

It was for this reason, Boyce suggested, that his co-workers had decided to prevent new men from going to work for Carnegie Steel and “stealing” the jobs of the Homestead steelworkers.

Boyce's assertion underscored what was perceived by many contemporary observers as the core issue of the lockout: the respective rights of workers and employers, and the putatively inviolate nature of the individual's right to private property. Boyce and his fellow Homestead steelworkers found
themselves with few friends who were willing to defend the workers' claim to rights in the mill. Those who did rise to defend the workers in questioning the sanctity of private rights were lonely voices: Democratic Sen. John M. Palmer of Illinois and a few others. 38

In a speech which shocked even the most committed liberals of the day, Senator Palmer declared that Homestead had proved that the cherished tenets of American individualism were woefully outmoded. “Within my lifetime, I have seen marvelous changes,” Palmer said. “There was a time when individualism was the universal rule and men lived almost alone because they could support themselves; but matters have changed.” According to Palmer, the most significant of these changes was the emergence of two distinct groups of Americans: workers and employers. Because of the vast power that employers had accumulated, it was now necessary for the state to protect the rights of employees. For, in Palmer's view, the affirmation of the worker's right to freedom of contract afforded him insufficient protection: “You cannot do it by asserting... that every (employer) has a right to the control of his own property in his own way; (and) that if (a worker) does not like to go to work for the Carnegies, he may go to work for somebody else.”39

In arguing that the state must take an active role to ensure the welfare of its working citizens, Palmer acknowledged that, in some cases, individual rights would have to be abridged. The protection of Carnegie's right to employ whomsoever he pleased, for example, could only abrogate the rights of labor – and of society in general. Palmer, echoing Alexis de Tocqueville's warnings about the dangers of a “manufacturing aristocracy,” declared: “If some solution is not found, this army of employees will be


controlled by the employers, and there will be established an aristocracy more terrible than exists in any free country, and this nobility of wealth will become our governors.”

Palmer, to be sure, did not offer a solution to the vexing problem of balancing individual and group rights. But, in his view, this much was clear: the state now had an obligation to limit the freedom of the employer to dispose of his property as he saw fit when such property was invested, as the Homestead Steel Works most assuredly were, with the “public interest.” The steelworkers in Homestead, Palmer maintained, had a “moral right” to employment in the mill, and the mill itself should be seen as a “public” institution whose owners “must hereafter be regarded as holding their property subject to the correlative rights of those without whose services (such) property would be utterly worthless.”

In truth, the rights claimed by steelworker Boyce and his colleagues, and defended by Senator Palmer, were hardly new. Such rights possessed a long-standing and respectable heritage, as one Youngstown lawyer who defended the Homestead steelworkers was quick to point out: it was, he noted, English common law that justified the privileging of public over private rights. Common law, the lawyer wrote, holds that “private right shall be subject and subservient to the public good.”

In arguing this position, the lawyer drew upon a well-defined juridical tradition. The legal historian Harry Scheiber, for instance, argues that American legal doctrine “has strongly suggested that some kinds of property should not be held exclusively in private hands, but should be open to the public or at least subject to what Roman law called the “jus publicum,” that is the “public right.” While this view has never constituted the dominant view in American jurisprudence, according to Scheiber, it does

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41 *Youngstown Evening News*, 11 Jul. 1892.
however reflect a central tension in the law between a tradition that seeks to protect public rights versus one that privileges entrepreneurial interests.  

Seen in this light, James Boyce's declaration that the Homestead steelworkers had a claim to rights in the mill owned by Carnegie Steel represents a peculiar combination of traditional and more modern efforts to grapple with the perplexing problem of safeguarding community interests in a polity which treasures individual liberty.

Marcel Mauss, the great French anthropologist who explored the complex social, moral, and political dynamics of the seemingly simple ritual of gift-giving, argued that gifts “are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered, but the accompanying behavior is formal pretense and social deception. For the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest” that reflects “nothing less than the division of labour itself....” A steelworker from Homestead once expressed the inherent ironies of Carnegie's gifts as follows: “Carnegie builds libraries for the workingmen, but what good are libraries to me, working practically eighteen hours a day?”

For Carnegie, libraries were magical – the only true “antidote” for what he characterized as “the temporary unequal distribution of wealth” and the concrete expression of his public stewardship. The rich man, Carnegie wrote, should “consider all surplus revenues which comes to him simply as trust funds which he is called upon to administer...” for the benefit of “his poorer brethren....” In his view,

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libraries were the most appealing expression of this public trusteeship because they offered to “the industrious and the ambitious,” as Abraham Lincoln might well have said, the surest means of self-advancement. The library, Carnegie proclaimed, was “a centre of light and learning, a never-failing spring of all good influences…” – influences which did not include the liberal arts and classical learning but rather were restricted to business and science. Success in these realms would ensure the advance of civilization – and justifiable financial rewards to individuals – theoretically, all individuals. The act of giving his wealth away by building libraries therefore offered to Carnegie the means of reconciling capitalism with inequality.44

But Carnegie paid a public fine for the fiasco that was Homestead, and an even greater private one for his faith in progress. When the industrial world reverted to barbarism in the Great War, Carnegie, woefully depressed, fell silent, and no belief in evolutionary progress, Spencerian or Darwinian, social or biological, innocent or calculated, could rescue him.

Yet Carnegie's philanthropy has retained its mythic aura. The Free Library building in Braddock, a recent commentator has remarked, stands even today amid the industrial ruins of my dad’s birthplace as an example of Carnegie's “extraordinary philanthropy.” For the “sole condition” attached to most of his library gifts, the commentator continues, was a pledge from municipal authorities to support the library with a minimal tax assessment. The truth, as we all know, was that Carnegie's gifts presupposed an exchange – an unequal, involuntary exchange – and the personal assessments he extracted from

44 “Wealth” appeared in North American Review 148 (June 1889), 653-64, and was continued as “The Best Fields for Philanthropy” in North American Review 149 (December 1889), 682-98. The essay was reprinted in Carnegie, The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays (New York:1900). For discussions of Carnegie's essay, see Wall, Carnegie, 806-15, and McCloskey, American Conservatism, 162-65. The quotations in the text are drawn from these works. This interpretation is suggested by McCloskey, American Conservatism, 163.
Braddock, Homestead and the other Monongahela steel towns which have their own Carnegie Library far exceeded the value of his gift. In no sense were his libraries “free” to the people.45

Hegemony – which is what Buck Duke was describing to that reporter in North Carolina – is a difficult concept to grasp, for it entails the conscious and unconscious manipulation of everyday structures of work and pleasure as well as a whole body of practices and expectations, thoughts and values, that circulate invisibly in our culture to reinforce patterns of domination and subordination. In this century, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian political theorist, provided the clearest route to understanding hegemony; in the last century, Andrew Carnegie, possibly surpassing both Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in the race to figure out the modern world that humans had created, and certainly no mean theorist himself, suggested ways to achieve it. The degree to which Carnegie succeeded raises an important question for all of us. But one thing is certain: many of his employees saw through his gambit before they succumbed to force.

In our own time, the man most often compared to Andrew Carnegie is Bill Gates, who announced recently that his post-Microsoft job will be figuring out “How to Help Those Left Behind” by practicing “creative capitalism.” Even if you have seen the videos of the snarky, belligerent, and wholly non-cooperative wise-ass as he is being deposed in the grand, abandoned, federal anti-trust case of the 1990s, it remains difficult to criticize a man who has poured billions and billions into a global campaign to end disease. Seen in this light, the death of Netscape, or the bugs that remain in Internet Explorer – and in the Windows operating system itself – seem, if not a positive good, at least worthwhile. But as was the case with Carnegie, the onset of Gates’s philanthropy has signaled no diminution of his power,

45 Pepper, “A Department Store of Learning.”
nor of the seductive example of his life and the individualist values he and his epigones champion on a daily basis. And while we do not yet have a Gates University, we do have PowerPoint.46

We also have a few critics of it. The most penetrating, Ian Parker, observed that this program has assumed a unique place in our lives. PowerPoint is not merely a “presentation” tool. Rather, “It edits ideas. It is, almost surreptitiously, a business manual as well as a business suit, with an opinion — an oddly pedantic, prescriptive opinion — about the way we should think. It helps you make a case, but it also makes its own case: about how to organize information, how much information to organize, how to look at the world. In the glow of a PowerPoint show, the world is condensed, simplified, and smoothed over….PowerPoint is strangely adept at disguising the fragile foundations of a proposal, the emptiness of a business plan; usually, the audience is respectfully still… and, with the visual distraction of a dancing pie chart, a speaker can quickly move past the laughable flaw in his argument. If anyone notices, it’s too late — the narrative presses on.”47

This narrative has pressed on for too long. Perhaps if I had used PowerPoint my points would have been more to the point. But as I have suggested, I enjoy paradoxes and contradictions, and the last thing I wanted to do in this essay tonight was to condense, or simplify, or smooth over the world. For I would argue that we are at a very dangerous juncture in our history, and our ability to evolve and survive, I think, may depend upon our ability and willingness to ask the difficult questions. Asking them might constitute a fitting birthday tribute to Charles Darwin.
