

WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 5, 2005—SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST?

Galileo must be turning in his grave. We may have thought his telescope refuted the church's teachings that the sun revolved around the earth, and God made the heavens. But now creationists and intelligent designers are attempting once again to overturn science—the Theory of Evolution, in this case. They believe that God not only made the heavens, but life on earth. The irony is that religious fundamentalists in general and religious Republicans in particular, are the most ardent advocates of Evolution's central tenet— survival of the fittest—the unscientific term for natural selection.

Why else did it take 3 days for the federal government to begin to respond to New Orleans' suffering? (Let the inhabitants take care of themselves is the Darwinian way.) Federal monies should be spent on guns, not butter or flood levees. Why else would neither the Director of FEMA (who was fired from a prior job running horse shows, according to a Boston newspaper) nor Homeland Security know for 2 days that 15,000 people were at the Superdome without food, water, or sanitary facilities?

The people were told to go there, but no plan was made to feed them or care for the infirm. (People should make their own plans is the Darwinian way.) Why is it government's job to provide enough transportation to evacuate the city, says Rush Limbaugh (another social Darwinist), or cache enough supplies along evacuation routes to care for those suddenly routed from their homes? It should not surprise us, therefore, when President Bush confessed he did not know that New Orleans was in danger of flooding!

Darwin's evolutionary theories really have a common sense, albeit harsh, basis. Survival of the fittest was meant to explain how species are able to adapt to their environment. Those who did it most successfully had more offspring, and so the traits of success were eventually bred into the species. Unsuccessful traits, such as birds that couldn't fly, were eventually bred out. Those creatures that couldn't adapt eventually died out. The same happens to species. Our own human species succeeded the Neanderthals who had thrived during the ice ages, then abruptly disappeared about 28,000 years ago.

Economic conservatives—our neo-classical colleagues who are currently in charge of the nation's economic policy—do not have any trouble with Darwin, either, since their economic credo amounts to social Darwinism. They believe unfettered marketplace competition is the most efficient selector of the fittest to prosper, and so fewer regulations are better. Let market forces dictate financial outcomes, and the market failures be their own disciplinary force. Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan has reiterated this credo in countless speeches.

Meanwhile, the marketplace is building up a head of steam with August's unemployment rate at or near full employment. This has done little for wages, however, as the U.S. Census Bureau just reported that poverty levels increased for the fourth consecutive year. The number of people in poverty grew 1.1 million to 37 million people in 2004. Household median incomes remained stuck at \$44,400 per year for the second consecutive year, after declining in 2001 and 2002 when accounting for inflation. In fact, household incomes have risen less than 1 percent per year since 1967 after inflation—30 percent in the past 38 years! And payroll earnings, which are about 80 percent of incomes, fell 2.3 percent relative to inflation in 2004.

UNEMPLOYMENT—August's rate fell to 4.9 percent, the lowest since 8/01, just before the 9/11 attacks. The unemployment lines shrank by 106,000, while 373,000 more said they had jobs in the Household survey, which includes the self-employed. Nonfarm payrolls increased by 169,000. But all were in service industries, as manufacturing lost another 14,000 jobs. Manufacturing has lost 110,000 jobs over the past year. The shift in our economy to lower-paying service sector jobs is the main reason wages have not increased in the US.

FACTORY AND SERVICE SECTOR ACTIVITY—The August ISM manufacturing activity index declined to 53.5% across all components of the index: new orders, employment, and inventories, while prices rose. The supply managers cited material costs, particularly oil, as instrumental in slowing activity.

August service sector activity, meanwhile, jumped 4.5 percent. Thirteen of 17 industries grew, with mining, transportation, utilities and real estate the leaders. It is noteworthy that the new export orders index soared 10 percent, which could boost GDP growth and shrink our trade deficit.

Why worry that Evolutionary science is being denigrated by the religious right? Because science is really about verifying physical reality via empirical observation, and religious conservatives (whether from Homeland Security, FEMA, or the White House) may continue to deny a physical world 'they' are not prepared for, such as happened to New Orleans. And that means we are probably not ready for a major disaster that strikes without any warning—such as another 9/11.

Who are the winners and losers in such a belief system? New Orleans showed them in heartbreaking detail. The 'unfit' were those who had no means to get out of town, or had no access to food, water, or medicines. Therefore, many of them died. It really doesn't matter whether it was another example of racism, or the suffering was due to a class system that discriminates on the basis of wealth, or an ideology that believes government should not be the provider of last resort. Poverty has increased under this Darwinian form of laissez-faire economics, rather than been eliminated. And that will not long remain acceptable to a majority of Americans.