

Hiram Caton

Marx Contra Darwin

YVES CHRISTEN has written an absorbing study of a minor episode in recent intellectual history — Karl Marx's response to Darwin's discoveries.* This is no small achievement. The sum total of Marx's comments on Darwin print to about two pages, whereas there is no record of Darwin's views about Marx, if indeed he ever heard of him. This is not exactly the stuff of a "great confrontation", you will say; so how does Christen justify his dramatic title?

To understand these things, it helps to know the vices of the Paris literary scene. The literati are sensation seekers who require a steady diet of exotic ideas, political manias, depressive philosophies, moral poses, and gossip. The author, a microbiologist and publicist,¹ titillates their fancy with a morality contest in which the opinions and theories of these demigods are assigned a rating on the humanitarianism scale. Marx was bound to lose the contest, as he does, because he scorned the humanitarian ethic that Darwin, along with most of his enlightened contemporaries, valued so highly. But no matter. The literati imagine that Marx was a bourgeois Marxist like themselves. So when Christen showed that he was an anti-Semite, racist, and critic of Darwinian evolution, he created a sensation in the salons.

In his attempts to riddle the enigmas of historical evolution, Darwin endorsed no theory of political and economic development, doubtless because he knew so little about these matters. His occasional references to "our great philosopher", Herbert Spencer, might seem to align him in the laissez-faire camp, except for the wisp of irony in Darwin's flattery of a man whose vanity he disapproved. There is a legend, however, that weakly associated Darwin with Marx. Its main source is Marx's affiliation of his doctrine with evolutionary biology. Darwin, Marx said in *Capital*, had discovered in nature the same process of development through struggle that he had described in human history. Engels subsequently amplified this claim in a natural philosophy meant to weld Marx's doctrine onto the natural science of the day. This sort of thing was fashionable in an era when the

prestige of science was high. Spencer believed that evolutionary theory supported his social philosophy, Comteans maintained that it supported theirs, and so on.

In the struggle with the Spencerians to appropriate the prestige of Darwin's name, Marxists invented an encounter between Darwin and Marx. Marx is said to have sent Darwin a copy of *Capital*, to which Darwin replied with a courteous note; subsequently, Marx purportedly offered Darwin the dedication of the English translation of *Capital*, which Darwin courteously declined. There is precious little glory for Marx in this story, although it is ritually repeated by those keen to bathe their hero in the light cast by the bourgeois giant. In the past decade, historical research has destroyed the documentary basis of these stories. Darwin's thank-you note for the copy of *Capital* is a forgery. The only evidence that Marx offered Darwin the dedication of *Capital* is a letter of Darwin's which is now known to have been written to Edward Aveling, Marx's son-in-law and avid Darwinian Marxist. It was Aveling who concocted the whole story of the Darwin-Marx encounter. In fact it never happened.

If Marx's public line was that Darwinian biology provided a zoological confirmation for his political economy, in private correspondence with Engels he took the opposite tack. His public homage to Darwin is now replaced by sneers at Darwin's obtuseness and ridicule of his logic. To the slowly comprehending Engels he explained that Darwinism was incompatible with his own theory on several critical points. One was the "struggle for existence". Since Marx posited class struggle as the motor of history, he could scarcely countenance a more basic competition, which moreover set proletarian against proletarian. He also didn't like the Malthusian postulate of Darwin's theory. The postulate states it as a general law that because fecundity in all species exceeds habitat carrying capacity, there are always surplus numbers to be eliminated by starvation or disease. It was a "libel on the human race", Marx protested, to apply this law to the human species. It wasn't compassion for suffering humanity that moved Marx to declare this important fact of life a social crime. He realised that compassion never filled an empty stomach, as he also knew that natural laws operate regardless of what may be thought about them.

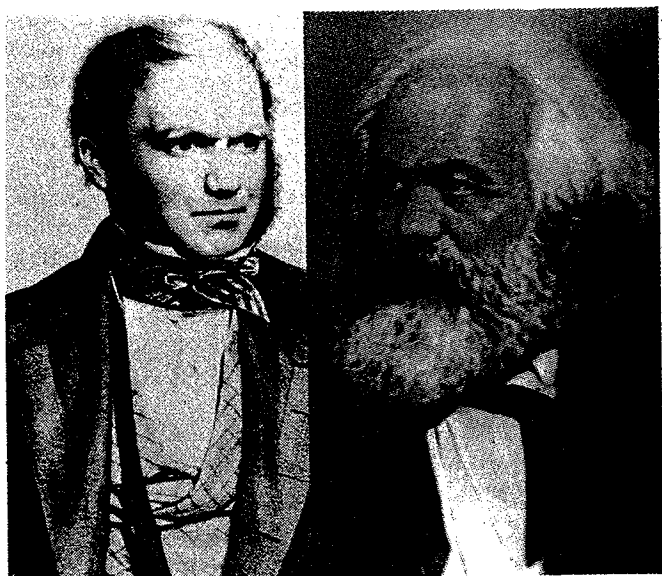
The Malthusian population law was wicked from a very special point of view: it contradicts Marx's doctrine

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that the poor can relieve their distress by grabbing the surpluses of the wealthy few. The effectiveness of Marxism as legitimating rhetoric depends entirely on the credibility of this claim. But the population law says that no matter how resources are distributed, population will exceed food supply. Our species long since discovered that infanticide is the most direct means of dealing with this problem. Chinese proletarians have recently rediscovered this alternative. Marx's interest in these factual matters was limited to fixing a taboo on them. Thus he punished Darwin with abusive mockery:

It is splendid that Darwin again discovers among plants and animals his English society with its divisions of labour, competition . . . and Malthusian struggle for existence.



Charles Darwin

Karl Marx

One sees the opportunism at work here. Previously Engels was advised that Malthus' law does not apply to the human species. Now we are told that it applies to capitalist societies, which Darwin attempted to justify by giving a contingent historical reality the status of natural necessity. This is not a confused mind, but a mind bent on discrediting the opposition by any means.

These traits appear clearly in Marx's violent objection to Darwin's evolutionary mechanism, natural selection. Christen notes the paradox that although the class struggle idea is "more Darwinian than Darwin" in its capacity to saturate history with fang and claw pathos, yet he rebelled against this cardinal insight of evolutionary biology. The author's analysis of the reason why is surely correct. Like Herbert Spencer, Marx needed an evolutionary biology that underwrote the view that the species advances, and alters its character, by the ongoing process of human action through social institutions. The required theory is Lamarck's doctrine that acquired characters are inherited, and this happens to be the very mechanism that Darwin replaced by natural selection. Spencer and Marx refused to accept natural selection because it was incompatible with projecting the next stage of history as the termination of struggle in an age of peace and co-operation. Darwinian theory, however, declares that struggle is coeval with life; and that

evolutionary times required for any substantial change in human behaviour must be measured in thousands of years at the shortest. Such views are plainly not compatible with the legitimating rhetorics of utopian politics, liberal or socialist.

Marx's preferred authority on evolution was not Darwin but one Pierre Trémaux, an itinerant intellectual, whose "grand law of the perfection of all beings" held that the secret of progress lay in soil chemistry. Strong and advancing peoples, Trémaux advised, had acquired good soil; retrograde and degenerate nations had been poisoned by their vegetables. Engels replied to Marx's initial enthusiastic letter about Trémaux with a curt dismissal ("worthless", he said) of this new version of the dietary superstition that you are what you eat. But as always on occasions of disagreement, Marx quickly browbeat Engels into submission.

Marx cared nothing for dietary superstitions. Trémaux was attractive to him because his soil chemistry anthropology laid a foundation for Marx's racial superstitions. That Marx was a racist should surprise no one familiar with nineteenth century intellectual history. Nearly everyone took the superiority of the Caucasian race for granted; even Darwin, who abominated slavery, imagined that blacks were racially inferior. Marx's racial views are merely available prejudices, distinguished only by the malice and venom of his utterances. Blacks he held in contempt as a degenerate segment of the human species; Trémaux explained this "fact" scientifically. He loathed Slavs, especially Russians. When he read Trémaux in 1865, he had accepted Pierre Duchinski's view that Russians were not Slavs but Mongols: "Scratch a Russian and find a Tartar", Marx mocked. Trémaux now explained that the soil east of the Dnieper "mongolised" the Russians, and Marx happily substituted this more scientific explanation for Duchinski's migration theory. Not quite so low on the scale of racial worth were the French; mere "toads" who might be improved by a few rifle volleys.

The lowest of the low were Jews, against whom Marx unleashed all the venom of gutter-snipe anti-Semitism. An early writing, *On the Jewish Question*, was a poison diatribe that condemned Jews using the grossest stereotypes of racial paranoia. His correspondence with Engels is peppered with abusive language, especially in speaking of the distinguished leader of the German Social Democratic party, Ferdinand Lassalle. In a rage of envy against the man who had turned Marx's own doctrine into the political success that Marx so craved, he called Lassalle "little nigger Jew", "syphilitic Jew", "greasy Jew" and like nastiness. When Lassalle died of a groin wound inflicted by his assassin, Marx and Engels gloated over his destruction and made coarse jokes about his unfortunate circumcision.

Marx was a pathological anti-Semitic Jew. Nothing aroused his fury more than a reminder of his Jewish origin. This self-loathing syndrome is not peculiar to Jews. Social mobility in the nineteenth century cast up many who migrated from one class or national identity to another. It was not uncommon for them to exaggerate the prejudices and manners of their adopted group. Marx migrated from Jewish identity to the heartland of

the Indo-Germanic race, Germany, whose stock was to his mind superior to all others. Marx's socialist rival Bakhunin hit this target when he styled the expatriate's doctrine "Bismarxism".

Some readers, I imagine, will find all this quite incredible. If Marx was so vast a bigot, why hasn't the American propaganda machine utilised this fact? Such questions betray a certain innocence about the way legitimating political rhetorics work. Their cognitive type is not science but legend. They establish their sway by recruiting emotions and channelling thought into managed stereotypes. That they are known to be false matters little to the managers. In the present instance, the facts about Marx's racism have been known to scholars for several generations, but they are not heard in the public area because they are incompatible with the stereotyped thought constitutive of the region in which legitimating rhetorics compete.² The person of Marx has been surrounded by so much taboo and mystagoguery ^{world} that he is unrecognised even by hostile "bourgeois" intellectuals, let alone by the average voter. Leading American authorities, for example, interpret Marx as a secular prophet espousing a salvation doctrine. They ignore the fact that Marx knew well enough about secular prophets (Saint-Simon, Owen, Comte), and that he sharply distanced himself from them. The personality of Marx corresponds completely to his central doctrine, the seizure of power by an elite corps ("communists"). He unsparingly ridiculed humanitarian utopians who believed that the era of blessedness could be brought in by persuasion and universal suffrage: the popular appeal of this doctrine is about nil. But the idea of a cataclysmic redeeming event ("revolution") has

enormous appeal to the suffering, to malcontents, and to social welfare entrepreneurs. Marx's basic idea was to mould these emotions into a battering ram that would carry his elite corps to power in a spectacular display of violence that would satisfy feelings of revenge as well as feelings of guilt. The idea that utopia could be reached in this way (or any other way) is of course a fantasy. But that does not in the slightest affect the success of the enterprise: Marxist politics has been the biggest growth industry of this century. Any party that can sell civil war as a popular commodity has evidently tapped some deep emotions. It will not be affected by the revelation of scandalous truths about its charismatic figures.

The progress of legitimating rhetorics can be checked if they fall athwart disabling facts. The second dimension of Christen's confrontation of Marx with Darwin concerns the contemporary clash between Marx's political biology and real ^{world} biology. This is the most timely and significant aspect of Christen's study. In China, extreme population pressure renders strictures against Malthus nugatory; the government preaches and imposes birth control. The Soviet government experiences chronic food shortage, and eliminates surplus population by denying food to millions. I will resume discussion of this aspect of the book when it appears in English translation, which one may hope will be soon.

NOTES

- 1 Christen is also the author of *l'Heure de la Sociobiologie* and *l'Homme*.
- 2 Marx's racism was documented by Nathaniel Weyl in *Karl Marx: Racist*, Arlington Press, 1979.

Oasis

A shed, a harness-room, very roof-hot,
with saddles and bridles on wall-hooks;
bits, stirrups, and greasy leather
harness; some derelict farm machinery
all beneath a windmill with a missing blade.

It all amounts to a permanent
camp near a waterhole. Two hundred
metres in any direction you like
and it's all left behind
to become an oasis.

and to this oasis life converges
in every possible form
for symbiotic survival: frogs
click and gargle in the waterhole
where wild ducks settle

and in the evening galahs
squabble in the peppertree
pick the wheat-grains by the silo and swarm
into the peppertree
and shriek their possession.

Sparrows, finches have utilised
every cranny of the outside roof
to roost and in the sun-warped
woodwork of the ancient shed
mason-wasps construct their mud cells
walling in anaesthetised spiders;

and the ants, spiders, lizards are legion;
there are snakes too and the inevitable
rats and mice enjoying their furtive
business among the sacks; and the possums,
those inquisite marsupials, come forth at night.

Last night a fox broke in and feathered
the floor with white feathers. Hares
lope to the dam's edge at dusk. Life
spread outside thinly beyond the metal gate
concentrates here, congregates here in the secure heat.

W. Hart-Smith