

Marx's Darwinism: A Historical Note

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IN THE LAST YEARS of his life, Marx developed an apparently close friendship with the English biologist E. Ray Lankester. At the time of their first meeting, probably in 1880, Lankester was about thirty-three years old and already distinguished in comparative morphology. At twenty-two, he had been appointed co-editor (with his father) of the important *Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science*; the following year he had been elected secretary of the biological section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, of which he became president in 1883, the year of Marx's death. Elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1875 and a member of the Council of the Linnean Society in 1882, he was also the author of scores of books, monographs, and scholarly articles. Lankester was to achieve even greater fame, and a measure of notoriety, in the years after Marx's death, but there is no doubt that by the time he and Marx became friends, he had already achieved a considerable professional reputation.

What invests the Lankester-Marx relationship with interest is not their wide differences in age, for Marx had a number of much younger friends. As Isaiah Berlin was perhaps the first to note, the aging Marx became increasingly difficult in his personal relationships, easily offended and irritated by the behavior of old friends, but he was a gracious mentor to younger colleagues who sought his advice and support. Lankester was distinguished from the youthful radicals with whom Marx was friendly by his profession. He ardently dedicated his professional life to defending, extending, and popularizing Darwin's work. A study of the Marx-Lankester

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relationship therefore promises to illuminate the murky question of Marx's ultimate attitude toward Darwinism.

This subject, much debated since the late nineteenth century, has suffered from the generally held assumption that Marx intended to dedicate *Capital*—or some volume or edition or translation of *Capital*—to Charles Darwin. The presumed attempt at dedication acquired particular significance since Marx's published works and correspondence from the mid-1870s on contain only a few passing references to Darwin and Darwinism. In his earlier writings, Marx had himself expressed a variety of attitudes toward Darwinism, from extreme enthusiasm through contempt; much of the time his feelings appear to have been mixed. Hence, one cannot simply extrapolate from the earlier Marx, much less from Engels. Under these circumstances, the assumed dedication of *Capital* acquired great significance.

This dedication, the story of which has been so influential in Marxist scholarship, never occurred—although the story lives on even in recent works on Marxism.¹

If Marx did not intend to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin, he did at least send him an inscribed copy of the second German edition, accompanied by a letter, in 1873. In this period Marx was concerned, even obsessed, with the problem of publicizing *Capital*. He brooded on its low sales and sparse reviews, especially in England, and plotted to increase both. In a recent article, Enrique Ureña notes that following publication of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx complained about the lack of attention, particularly in the English press, or considered various plans for bringing it to public view, nearly all unsuccessful, in as many as a hundred letters.² He circulated copies, and not only to sympathizers. He had stressed in his letters to Engels and to Ludwig Kugelmann that it did not matter if people commented favorably, or even accurately, so long as they only talked about it. Hence, his sending a copy to Darwin was perhaps motivated by genuine respect for Darwin's scientific achievements but more likely by the hope that the premier scientist of his age would take some note of it.

On the same day that Marx sent a copy of *Capital* to Darwin, he sent one to Herbert Spencer. Most of Darwin's copy remained uncut, although whether from lack of interest or difficulties with the language—Darwin read German, but not easily—or the first exacerbated by the second, we can not know for certain. We do

know that Spencer did not read German; he said so in his note of acknowledgment to Marx. Two years later, Marx sent him a copy of the just-completed French translation. Unfortunately, Spencer had only a limited command of French, and it is doubtful, notwithstanding the polite expression of interest in his earlier acknowledgment of the German edition, that he ever read it. Spencer's lengthy autobiography makes no mention of Marx or of *Capital*. It would appear that Marx, himself fluent in the major modern European as well as classical languages, overestimated the linguistic competence of English intellectuals. In any case, we are left with almost nothing in the way of clues to his mature attitude toward Darwinism. Hence, the significance of his relationship with E. Ray Lankester.

AT LEAST—that is the apparent significance of their relationship. But Lewis Feuer imagines a significance of a completely different kind. In a recent article he aims to show that their friendship indicates that "in his last years, Marx appears to have been longing to evolve from ideology to science."³

This thesis, of a fundamental shift in the character of Marx's thought, develops primarily out of Feuer's analysis of the Marx-Lankester friendship. The analysis is not burdened by the weight of many facts. If Marx wrote virtually nothing about his relationship with Lankester other than the assertion that they were friends, and Lankester absolutely nothing about his relationship with Marx, Feuer infers the nature of their relationship from what is known in general of the character of both men. What are, therefore, Feuer's assessments of Lankester and Marx? Feuer writes: "Almost until the last years of his life Karl Marx never enjoyed the friendship or intellectual association of a single British man of science. At any rate, Marx made no effort to get to know any of the British scientific community, evidently preferring the security and dominance in his own narrow political circle." It is apparently Lankester's exception to this rule that invests his relationship to Marx with such significance. He continues:

Toward the end of his life, however, he came to know and valued highly an association with a young English scientist, Edwin Roy Lankester. It was a new experience for Marx—to be on friendly terms with a deep-searching, far-ranging investigator into natural phenomena, unencumbered by an ideological or political commit-

ment, and whose standpoint moreover on some basic questions differed profoundly from Marx's.

Hence, we begin with the assumption that Marx was a narrow-minded ideologue, at least until his last years, and Lankester a broad-minded empiricist. This assumption allows us to infer Lankester's view of Marx: it is what any man of Lankester's sort would necessarily have thought of him.

It is possible that Lankester expressed his view of Marx's character to someone, somewhere. If so, Feuer has not discovered it, and neither have I, in spite of reading all that could be located of both Lankester's published material and his letters in many different collections. It does seem likely that the older Lankester, who became very much an establishment figure, was embarrassed by his youthful friendship with Marx, for with one exception—more on this shortly—he apparently never mentioned it even to friends with Marxist or generally radical sympathies. But Feuer thinks that we can infer Lankester's view of Marx from "The Psycho-Analysis of Karl Marx," a section of H. G. Wells's novel *The World of William Clissold*. This inference depends upon the supposition that Lankester was the principal informant for what Feuer terms Wells's "brilliant" portrait of Marx. This hypothesis is, on the face of it, implausible. Wells's comments on Marx, as opposed to Marxism as a doctrine, are a brief four or five pages, almost devoid of the kind of personal detail in which Wells was always interested and which he could presumably have obtained from Lankester. He certainly did not need to learn from Lankester that Marx led a "sedentary, bookish life." Wells viewed Marx with extreme hostility, typified by the opening statement of the "Psycho-Analysis" in which he characterizes Marx as the "maggot" of a "decayed socialism."⁴

LANKESTER'S RELATIONSHIP with Marx was, however, apparently one of warm friendship, as Feuer himself stresses elsewhere in the article. In fact, it is the friendship which underpins the whole argument. If their relationship were not warm, then we could hardly accept the thesis that it reflects a turn in Marx's thinking from "ideology" to "science" and a "new pleasure in taking the world freshly, without the interposition of a dogmatic framework." And if it were, why suppose that Lankester provided the

material upon which Wells's vituperative attack was based? It is possible that Lankester came to believe, later in his life, that Marx was not only misguided in his politics—he may always have believed as much—but possessed of an unpleasant personality and debased character that he had somehow failed to notice at the time. There is not, however, the slightest shred of evidence for such a conclusion. Feuer argues, moreover, that Marx was changing, becoming less dogmatic, less ideological, more open, taking pleasure in seeing the world freshly. This is the new Marx represented by the friendship with Lankester. But it is hardly the Marx of Wells's "Psycho-Analysis."

To return to more substantive issues: Feuer suggests that, besides turning from "ideology" to "science," "Marx's thought toward the end of his life was taking on a pessimistic hue." A substantial part of the evidence for this hypothesis concerns Marx's relationship with Lankester. In 1880, Lankester published a small book, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*, in which he aimed to show that evolution could be degenerative, defined as manifesting a loss in structural complexity. Organisms, asserted Lankester, could become simpler than their forebears and, like most nineteenth-century biologists and apparently Feuer, he equated "simpler" with "lower." The book's last chapter develops an analogy with human cultural evolution in which Lankester warns of the possibility that European civilization could also degenerate.

In 1881, Marx, in the course of a long letter to his friend Nikolai Danilov, inquired as to whether Lankester's "Chapter on deterioration" had been translated into Russian. This query seems to Feuer of profound significance. It indicates to him that Marx had come to reject a fundamental aspect of his earlier work. "Certainly," he writes, "Marx must have recognized that Lankester's contribution to biological theory was wholly contrary to the tenor of Marxist dialectical optimism." Hence, he concludes that Marx must have been changing. After all, he "did not dispute the evidence accumulated by Lankester and Darwin which showed that evolution did not subserve any law of dialectical progress."

Even if one accepts as Marx's the highly deterministic version of Marxism posited by Feuer, and assumes that that version is contradicted by Darwin's and Lankester's scientific work, serious difficulties remain in the way of generalizing about fundamental shifts

in Marx's world view on the basis of his query to Danielson. First, Marx was interested in the problem of degeneration long before he read Lankester's book. That the French explorer and scientist Pierre Trémaux was able logically to explain degeneration is one of the reasons Marx gives for preferring his evolutionary theory to that of Darwin as early as 1865. So if Marx's attitude toward this problem reflects his social views, he had been a pessimist for at least fifteen years before he met Lankester.⁵

There is, however, no necessary link. There is not even any proof that Marx read Lankester's book, much less agreed with the social implications of the concluding chapter. All that we know is that Marx inquired as to whether a friend's book had been translated. We cannot infer that Marx's views on evolutionary theory were, in every respect, those of his friend. (Surely it is a common enough experience among academics to inquire after a friend's work, sometimes with only the haziest understanding of its point). Marx may have thought *Degeneration* brilliant, he may have agreed with every word. But he does not say so, and we have no license to assume it and then use that assumption in support of a generalization about a fundamental shift in the character of Marx's thought.

IF MARX, in his last years, was indeed evolving from "ideology" to "science" and was beset by pessimism, no one noticed, or at least so recorded, at the time—including Marx himself. I do not know of any evidence from memoirs, or from Marx's own published correspondence or that of family members, friends, or colleagues, which indicates that Marx was re-examining his fundamental world-view in the last few years of his life. What these sources do show is that Marx was extremely ill, depressed over the illnesses of his wife and daughters, and generally unable to work. Such work as he did accomplish during this period—on *Capital*, the preface to the Russian translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, and the notes on Morgan's *Ancient Society*—does not reflect any fundamental changes in his perspective. It is simply unreasonable to expect that the bare fact of Marx's friendship with Lankester, the content of which is virtually unknown, should serve to override all other evidence—or, more accurately, lack of evidence—for an important shift in Marx's views.

Little is known about the nature and meaning of Lankester's

friendship with Marx. That their relationship was fairly close is indicated by two references to Lankester as a friend in Marx's letters, by Lankester's comment that he knew Marx "intimately" in one of his letters to Wells, and by Lankester's attendance at Marx's funeral. But what they found attractive in each other and what they discussed is simply not known. Their original relationship was almost certainly a medical one—Lankester recommended the physician who attended Marx's wife in her last illness—out of which developed a warm personal attachment. It seems likely that they at least occasionally discussed politics and science. But there is, unfortunately, no record of any such discussions in the available correspondence of either Marx or Lankester. Lankester corresponded with many and different sorts of people, some of whom had Marxist or at least Fabian sympathies, but as far as I have been able to determine, he never discussed with any of them his early ~~friendship with Marx. If anything, he seems to have been at pains to hide it, to remember that Lankester, in his youth, went through a short radical, if not strictly Marxist, phase, which later embarrassed him somewhat. It may be that his relationship with Marx had little or no political content but he was later ashamed of it nonetheless. In any case, with the exception noted, he apparently did not write about it, even to his closest friends or to Marxist acquaintances such as Karl Pearson or J. B. S. Haldane.~~

Marx's relationship with Lankester may provide the clue to a quite unrelated puzzle: how to account for Engels' famous speech at Marx's funeral in which he asserted that: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history." This comparison of Darwin's project with Marx's has been cited in countless debates on the nature of Marx's thought. Contemporary accounts of Marx's funeral differ markedly about the number and composition of the mourners, but it is certain that the group was small—probably not more than a dozen, including Engels and members of Marx's family. Lankester, whom all accounts place at the graveside, was a distinguished scientist known for his vigorous defense of Darwin's work. Perhaps—and under the circumstances I stress the perhaps—Lankester's presence inspired this famous and troublesome line. If so, it need not bear quite so much weight in disputes over the meaning of Marxism as it has historically been made to carry.

REFERENCES

- 1 For example: Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 72; Saul K. Padover, *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 364; John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 163.
 - 2 Enrique M. Ureña, "Marx and Darwin," *History of Political Economy*, vol. 9 (Winter 1977), pp. 557-558
 - 3 Lewis S. Feuer, "The Friendship of Edwin Ray Lankester and Karl Marx: The Last Episode in Marx's Intellectual Evolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 40 (1979), p. 646.
 - 4 H. G. Wells, *The World of William Clissold: A Novel at a New Angle* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), p. 166.
 - 5 I have written about Marx's attitude toward Trémaux in "In the Interests of Civilization': Marxist Views of Race and Culture in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 42 (January-March 1981), pp. 115-138, and, more briefly, in "Marxism, Darwinism, and the Theory of Two Sciences," *Marxist Perspectives*, vol. 2 (1979), pp. 116-143.
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