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KARL MARX – 200 YEARS ON

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At Marx's graveside in 1883, Engels associated his great friend's work with that of Darwin. He claimed that 'just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history'.¹ This association was reinforced in the twentieth century by the publication in 1931 of a letter, supposedly from Darwin to Marx, politely rejecting a proposal to dedicate to him the second edition of *Capital*. Even for commentators at the time, it was a mystery why this proposal should have been made in 1880, seven years after the book's appearance in the 1873. But commentators from Isaiah Berlin onwards accepted the dedication story. It was only in the 1980s that the myth of Marx's proposed dedication to Darwin was finally laid to rest as a result of careful research by Margaret Fay.² It turned out that the 1880 letter was not addressed to Marx, but to the notorious partner of Eleanor, Marx's daughter, Edward Aveling, who had proposed to dedicate to Darwin his newly completed text book, *The Students' Darwin*.

In this lecture, I shall argue that Marx's theory of history contradicts Darwin's conception of nature in ways which cannot be reconciled. The question then arises, why did Marx in the 1870s apparently acquiesce in Engels' asserted alignment between the two theories, and why was this alignment between Darwin and Marx so quickly accepted? This is a more important question than it might at first seem. For the idea of the continuity between the two theories underlays the possibility of establishing a convincing coupling between Marx and an increasingly emphatic form of determinism, or what Engels called 'the materialist conception of history', in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century.

Engels' admiration for Darwin was clear. In *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, published in 1882, Engels had already praised Darwin for dealing 'the metaphysical conception of nature the heaviest blow by his proof that all organic beings, plants, animals and man himself were products of a process of evolution. This was an elaboration of the argument Engels had put forward in his *Anti-Dühring*.

In nature, amid the welter of innumerable changes, the same dialectical laws of motion force their way through as those which in history govern the apparent fortuitousness of events, the same laws which similarly form the thread running through the history of the development of human thought and gradually rise to consciousness in thinking men.³

In *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, he also sanctioned the extension of quasi-Darwinist conceptions into the understanding of modern industry and the world market by asserting, 'it is the Darwinian struggle of the individual for existence transferred from nature to society with intensified violence'.⁴

It has commonly been claimed that Engels in later years created a distorted version of Marx's thought. But the claim is generally made in vague and generic terms. George Lichtheim asserted, but without much detail, that 'the philosophy of the later Engels was heavily indebted to positivism', while Shlomo Avineri claimed that 'the

¹ Friedrich Engels, 'Karl Marx's Funeral', in *K. Marx and F. Engels, Collected Works*, 50 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004) [subsequently MECW], vol. 24, p. 467

² For an account of the supposed dedication, see Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life*, London, Fourth Estate, 1999

³ Friedrich Engels, 'Second Preface to Herr Dühring', 23 September 1885, *MECW*, vol. 25, p.11

⁴ Friedrich Engels, 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific', *MECW*, vol. 24. pp. 301, 313



origins of Engels' views were to be found in a vulgarised version of Darwinism and biology, with the Hegelian terminology as a shallow veneer'. I shall argue that the difference between the assumptions of Marx and Engels are not satisfactorily explained by references to Darwin or positivism. Such differences were already present in the mid-1840s when Marx and Engels first met, and clearly *preceded* any German or European impact made by Darwin, or the Positivist Philosopher, Auguste Comte.

The affinity with Darwin and his desire to align him with Marx came easily to Engels. He had already adopted a conception of man as 'natural being' from the time of his closeness to Owenism during the two formative years he had spent working for the family textile firm in Manchester between 1842 and the summer of 1844, when he also met up with Marx. Although, he had consorted with Bruno Bauer and other Young Hegelians in Berlin in 1842, his Hegelianism was relatively superficial. Engels' distinctive voice emerged, not within the Young Hegelian circles of Berlin, but in Manchester. There, he regularly attended Owenite debates, and became more conversant with Owenite philosophical assumptions voiced in the Manchester Hall of Science than with the philosophical tradition of German idealism. In 1843 Engels declared his closeness to the Owenites – the 'English socialists' – with whom in 1843 he agreed 'upon almost every question'.

What particularly drew Engels to the Owenites was their opposition to competition, particularly in economic life. The essential characteristic of competition was the separation of interests. In trade, the aim was 'to buy cheap and sell dear' and thus to create diametrically opposed interests in every exchange. Free trade would make this system universal. This 'ignominious war of competition' had done its best to dissolve nationalities, to universalise enmity, to transform mankind into a horde of ravenous beasts. It would go on to produce the dissolution of the family through the factory system.

The Owenite criticism of competition and commercial society built upon the prevailing assumptions of Anglo-French sensationalism and materialism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Man, according to this account, was an animal, a natural being, who pursued pleasure and avoided pain. His or her character was shaped by the environment in which s/he was raised. As Robert Owen put it in *A New View of Society* of 1813-1816, man was born with a desire to obtain happiness and also endowed with faculties which enabled him to 'receive, convey and compare' ideas. The ideas themselves came from the outside: 'the knowledge which man receives, is derived from the objects around him, and chiefly from the example and instruction of his immediate predecessors'.⁵ Owen insisted that 'the character of man is formed *for* him, and not *by* him.'⁶ Improvement would be brought about by the removal of harmful religious ideas, better methods of education and the increase in scientific knowledge. In this way, changes in the environment would lead to a transformation of human nature and an increase in human happiness.

But Engels went beyond the Owenite critique of competition in two ways: first, by following the French socialist, Proudhon in ascribing the contradictions of political economy to the corrosive logic of private property; and, secondly, by following Feuerbach in relating the development of private property and competition to 'the unconscious condition of mankind'. What distinguished man from animal in Feuerbach's theory was not consciousness, but '*species* consciousness'. Man's lack of 'species consciousness', his loss of humanity, was ascribed to the 'inversion' associated with religion in Feuerbach's theory of 'abstraction' – or in the radical communist gloss added by Hegelians like Engels and Moses Hess – with the establishment of money and private property.⁷ In the critique of political economy, which Engels wrote for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in 1843, and which first attracted Marx's attention to the subject, Engels argued that for the past eighty years as a result of competition, 'trade crises' had arrived 'just as regularly as the great plagues did in the past – and they have brought more misery and immorality in their train than the latter'. This 'constant alternation of

⁵ Robert Owen, 'A New View of Society, or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice', (1813-1816) in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Selected Works of Robert Owen*, 4 vols., vol.1, London, Pickering, 1993, p. 70.

⁶ Gregory Claeys (ed.), Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and other Writings*, London, Pickering, 1993, p. 43

⁷ Friedrich Engels, 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy', p. 427. 'Value, the primary factor, the source of price, is made dependent on price, its own product. As is well known, this inversion is the essence of abstraction; on which see Feuerbach'. Feuerbach's original point had been that God did not create man. Man created God.



over-stimulation and flagging' 'goes on unendingly'. 'This law', he wrote, 'is purely a law of nature and not a law of the mind', 'a natural law based on the unconsciousness of the participants'....But it would 'finally result in a social revolution such as has never been dreamt of in the philosophy of the economists'. A process of self-destruction would usher in a new world: 'the great transformation to which the century is moving – the reconciliation of mankind with nature and with itself'.⁸

If the origins of Engels' enthusiasm for Darwin could be traced back to his earlier Owenite conception of man as a natural being propelled forward by the promptings of nature, what conversely explains Marx's much more reluctant acknowledgement of him? There is no doubt that Marx, probably at Engels's prompting, sent Darwin a complimentary copy of the second edition of *Capital* in 1873. He and his family no doubt also enjoyed the discomfort Darwin had created for the conventional Christianity of Victorian society. But the idea of a deeper intellectual affinity between the two thinkers is *forced*. While there is good reason to believe that Engels's writings about history and nature could from the beginning be strongly aligned with Darwin's later conception of natural history, the same cannot be said of Marx. The best Marx could observe in relation to *The Origin of the Species* was that Darwin's book 'suits my purpose in that it provides a basis in natural science for the historical class struggle'.⁹ But when prompted by Engels' enthusiasm to 'take another look', his acknowledgements were somewhat backhanded, and his stance ironic. 'It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovers among the beasts and plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions" and the Malthusian struggle for existence'.¹⁰

Marx showed much more enthusiasm for a book by Pierre Trémaux, *Origines et Transformations de l'Homme et des autres Êtres* (The Origins and transformations of Man and other Beings), which appeared in 1865. This book, he argued, represented 'a *very significant* advance over Darwin' 'Its historical and practical applications', he claimed, were 'far more significant and pregnant than Darwin', especially in its finding that nationality possessed a 'basis in nature'. Trémaux claimed, first that 'the physical features of the earth' were responsible for the differentiation between species; and, secondly, that merely transitional forms encountered rapid extinction in comparison with the slow establishment and subsequent fixity of the *species*.¹¹

In response to Marx, Engels wrote dismissively in October 1865 that there was nothing to Trémaux's theory because he knew nothing of geology and was incapable of historical critique. And he added 'that stuff about the nigger Santa Maria (a Senegal missionary, who claimed that black people descended from white people) and the whites turning into Negroes is enough to make one die of laughing'.¹² But Marx stuck to his opinion: "Trémaux's basic idea about the *influence of the soil*...is, in my opinion, an idea which needs only to be *formulated* to acquire permanent scientific status, and that quite independently of the way Trémaux presents it'.¹³ Furthermore, a week later, despite conceding some of Engels's points about Trémaux's 'geological howlers' and 'seriously deficient...literary-historical criticism', Marx insisted to his admirer, Dr Kugelmann, that the book 'represents – WITH ALL THAT AND ALL THAT – an advance over Darwin'.¹⁴

Leaving aside his particular enthusiasm about Trémaux on the influence of the soil, what needs to be explained was Marx's expressed distance from Darwin. Just as in the case of Engels, Marx's attitude had deeper roots. This was not the expression of a passing criticism, but the reiteration of a philosophical and political position Marx had held since the 1840s, – a restatement of the fundamental distinction between nature and history present in his work since 1844.

Marx's approach offered a sharp contrast to the naturalistic version of materialism espoused by the largest radical and socialist groupings in the mid-1840s, whether the Owenites in England together with Engels or the

⁸ Engels, 'Outlines', pp. 423-4, 441-2

⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 January 1861, *MECW*, vol. 41, pp. 246-7

¹⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 June 1862, *MECW*, vol. 41, p. 381

¹¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 August 1866, *MECW*, vol. 42, pp. 304-5

¹² Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 2 October 1866 *MECW*, vol. 42, pp.320

¹³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 3 October 1866, *MECW*, vol. 42, p. 322

¹⁴ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 9 October 1866, *MECW*, vol. 42, p. 327



followers of Étienne Cabet in France. Their starting point, standard in England from the time of Locke through to Bentham, prevalent among the *Philosophes* and *Idéologues* in France, as well as the followers of Spinoza in Germany, was a conception of Man as a natural being: a contrast above all to the orthodox Christian emphasis upon original sin. In this approach, Man was a product of his environment, a consumer governed by his appetites and needs. By improving this environment through better education and a more enlightened attitude towards reward and punishment, it would be possible to transform human nature and increase the extent of human happiness.

Marx's alternative, elaborated in the so-called 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', was to apply the insights of German idealism to the understanding of labour, to recuperate its emphasis upon activity and man's position as a producer.¹⁵ Most striking was the connection made in these writings between two areas of discourse hitherto unrelated to each other: on the one hand, the discussion of the social question and the plight of the proletariat, which had developed in the 1830s, and on the other, the world transforming significance accorded to labour in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. By making this connection, Marx identified socialism with human self-activity as it had been invoked in the idealist tradition following the philosophical revolution accomplished by Kant.¹⁶

Kant's position was clearly elaborated in his *Essay* of 1786, which reinterpreted the story of the Fall as a parable about man's escape from a natural condition. Despite the yearning to escape 'the wretchedness of his condition', 'between him and that imagined place of bliss, restless reason would interpose itself, irresistibly impelling him to develop the faculties implanted with in him...It would make him take up patiently the toil which he yet hates, and pursue the frippery which he despises...Man's departure from that paradise...was nothing but the transition from an uncultured, merely animal condition to the state of humanity, from bondage to instinct to rational control – in a word, from the tutelage of nature to the state of freedom'.¹⁷

If Kant and Fichte had already challenged the passivity of the image of humans as 'natural beings', it was in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* of 1807, that Hegel built upon this idealist inheritance and translated it into a vision of history. According to Marx, Hegel had grasped 'the self-creation of Man as a process' and in so doing had grasped the essence of labour, the creation of Man as 'the outcome of Man's *own labour*'.¹⁸ Man, as Marx wrote in 1844, was not merely a 'natural being', but 'a *human* natural being'. His point of origin was not nature, but history. Unlike animals, man made his activity 'the object of his will'. He could form objects in accordance with the laws of beauty. Thus history could be seen as the humanisation of nature through man's 'conscious life activity' and at the same time, the humanisation of man himself through 'the forming of the five senses'. History was the process of Man becoming 'species being' and the basis of man's ability to treat himself as 'a universal, and therefore a free being'.¹⁹

¹⁵ Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', *MECW*, vol. 3, pp. 229-349

¹⁶ In emphasising Marx's relationship with the idealist tradition, I am deeply indebted to the insights of Douglas Moggach and his idea of 'post-Kantian perfectionism'. See D. Moggach, 'Post-Kantian Perfectionism' in D. Moggach (ed.), *Politics, Religion and Art: Hegelian Debates*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2011, pp.179-203; and for Marx's relationship with this tradition, see in particular the essay by D. Moggach, 'German Idealism and Marx' in Nicholas Boyle, Liz Disley & John Walker (eds.) *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, Cambridge, 2013.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History' (1786), Lewis Beck (ed.) *On History. Immanuel Kant*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1980, pp. 59-60

¹⁸ Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole', *MECW*, vol. 3. pp. 332-333; Hegel had reached this position in his years at Jena (1800-1807). In his lectures from 1803 onwards, he reversed the classical priority of activity (*praxis*) over labour (*poiesis*); work was no longer presented as a subordinate component of practical philosophy, confined to 'the relativity of a working class', but now became a central moment in the constitution of 'spirit'. Practical behaviour was no longer confined to the concept of interaction with others or, as in Kant and Fichte, to the inner workings of moral subjectivity in interaction with its own sensuousness as object. For Hegel, this interaction between the self and the not-self was now extended through a new concept of labour to incorporate the whole of mankind's struggle with nature. Work and development were brought together in a transcendental history of consciousness, activity was objectified in work. See M. Riedel, *Between Tradition and Revolution, The Hegelian Transformation of Political Philosophy*, Cambridge 1984, chs.1 &5.

¹⁹ K. Marx, 'estranged labour', *MECW*, vol. 3, p. 280



The Idealist tradition was crucial in focussing upon the capacity of human subjects to resist or override natural desires or needs and to submit these impulses to rational scrutiny. It was what was meant by the term *spontaneity* in the Idealist tradition, that is inward self-determination, a concept that was present in German philosophy from the time of Leibniz at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and which became the centre piece of Kant's conception of practical reason later in that century.²⁰ Its crucial political implication was that individuals might shape their actions, not in pursuit of welfare and happiness, but in the establishment of morality and right. One of Hegel's crucial achievements in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* was to show how the concept of right might extend beyond the conscience of the individual, and become embodied in institutions, in interpersonal relations and form the basis of what he called 'ethical life'.²¹

The self-making of man through labour invoked in the 1844 *Manuscripts* contained Marx's version of spontaneity and freedom as essential human attributes; and it played a major part in the picture of the energy, dynamism and forward movement of the forces of production in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. Labour, as a form of activity, meant a continuous process of interaction with nature, but not one simply driven by need, for as the *Manuscripts* emphasised, it could also be associated with freedom, for man could shape things according to the law of beauty; he made the same point in the *Grundrisse* in the 1850s. Labour as the activity of self-directed individuals was purposive, teleological. The resistance to be overcome in any labour process was either natural – the operation of causal mechanisms in the physical world – or historical – the conflict it might occasion with existing social relations between employers and the employed. In this sense human history might be understood as the continual and cumulative process of interaction between teleology and causality.

In the light of this approach, the depiction of man as a passive being, as a consumer dependent upon nature to supply his needs became Marx's principal criticism of contemporary socialism. That was why his so-called *Theses on Feuerbach*, written early in 1845 were as much a criticism of the socialism of the time, as of Feuerbach himself. Man was not just a sensuous being; he also made himself through the practical use of his senses. The sensuous world, experienced by man was the result of human industry, and the state of society. This was reiterated in Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach, which argued, 'that the materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated'.²² It also helped to explain Marx's objection to the French socialist, Proudhon. The labour question was not simply about consumption or wages. The ambition of organised workers was not simply to attain 'greater happiness' through the acquisition of more material goods, but to change productive relations. True communism was 'the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement.

It was the idea that *freedom* was self-activity, and that the capacity to produce was Man's 'most essential' characteristic that had led Marx to conclude in 1844 that *estranged* labour formed the basis of all other forms of estrangement and therefore that, 'the whole of human servitude' was 'involved in the relation of the worker to production'. For *estranged* labour was the inversion of 'conscious life activity'. Man's '*essential being*' became a mere means to his '*existence*'. In Kantian terms, this meant that wage work should be considered a form of heteronomy, an inversion of freedom that is conceived as the self-activity of the producer.

In the light of the strong distinction he had made between history and nature, particularly in his 1844 writings, evidence of Marx's philosophical distance from Darwin in the 1860s is no longer surprising. Darwin did not believe that history possessed any unilinear meaning or direction. As he wrote in *The Descent of Man* in 1871: 'I

²⁰ See Moggach, 'German Idealism and Marx', pp. 82-107

²¹ 'Ethical life' is an imperfect rendering of the German, *Sittlichkeit*, because the German word not only refers to morality, but equally to custom. The German word *Sitte* means custom. Thus *Sittlichkeit* refers to a mode of conduct habitually practiced by a social group such as a nation, a class or a family, and regarded as a norm of decent behaviour. See M. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford 1992, pp. 91-93.

²² Karl Marx, '*ad Feuerbach*', *MECW*, vol. 5, p. 4



believe in no fixed law of development'.²³ Marx objected that Darwin seemed to consider progress 'purely accidental'; and that the 'historical and political applications' of his work were comparatively insignificant.²⁴

It is clear, therefore, that the differences of attitude towards Darwin between Marx and Engels in the 1860s are best understood as the continuation of an earlier and important division of opinion, though one they never explicitly articulated, beginning in the 1840s. The focal point of difference then concerned the interpretation of Malthus, which as in the case of Darwin, raised similar questions about the relationship between history and nature. The divergent positions mattered because it became of pivotal importance in the definition of what became known as 'Marxism' in the last third of the 19th century - a process in which the politics of Marx, and the broader philosophy, which underlay it, became submerged beneath of the nature-based viewpoint of Engels.

The significance and extent of the difference between Marx and Engels on these questions has not been generally discussed. Historians have tended to treat the discussion of Malthus found in the writings of Marx and Engels as part of a single shared critique. This was the emphasis found in Ronald Meek's *Marx and Engels on Malthus* of 1953, a standard anthology which highlighted both the supposed monstrosity of Malthus and stressed his role as the defender of bourgeois class interests.

But closer examination of relevant texts suggests important differences of approach between Marx and Engels. Initially, Marx was happy to reiterate the attack on Malthus, which Engels had developed in the *Umrisse* in 1843. In 1844, for instance, in an essay attacking Arnold Ruge's position on social reform, Marx derided the acceptance by the English Parliament of Malthus's 'philanthropic' theory, according to which 'pauperism *in general*' was 'an *eternal law of nature*' and was defined as '*poverty which the workers have brought upon themselves by their own fault*' and treated therefore, not as a misfortune to be alleviated, 'but rather a crime which has to be suppressed and punished.'²⁵

Marx and Engels' agreement about the reactionary character of Malthusianism obscured differences of philosophical formation and outlook, particularly on the question of the relationship between history and nature. On this question, the fundamental difference was between Owen, Engels *and* Malthus on the one hand, and Marx on the other. Malthus himself, it is important to remember, like Owen and later Engels believed that Man was a passive being shaped by nature. In Malthus's *Essay*, drawing upon the tradition of natural theology, mankind was likened to pieces of clay, moulded into unique shapes, but with no control over how they were moulded. The nature he discussed had been specifically designed by God. Ultimately, the advance from savagery to civilisation had not been a human achievement. 'This advance had been the effect of a mighty process of God...a process necessary to awaken inert, chaotic matter into spirit'.²⁶ In Owen's thought, man's determination by an external environment governed by competition, was the product of ignorance and could be remedied by science and education. In Engels', the determination of humans as sensuous beings by the external environment, or what Engels was later to call 'the materialist conception of history', was the product of the 'unconscious condition of mankind' in the absence of 'species consciousness'. In its absence, men were no different from animals. This 'unconscious' state of mankind was to be ascribed to the distortions produced by religion and private property. As the result of this lack of 'species consciousness', Man - like any other animal - was a creature wholly determined by nature.

In Marx, by contrast, human history remained distinct from natural history, whether man possessed species-consciousness or not. Man was not simply a 'sensuous being' as he had been portrayed by Feuerbach. The sensuous world was in fact the result of human industry and the state of society. Man was determined not by nature, but by history, even if that history took a perverse form. Competition and the capitalist mode of production had nothing to do with nature.

²³ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 2 vols, London 1871, vol.1, pp. 96-7

²⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 January 1861, *MECW*, vol. 41, pp. 246-247; 7 August 1866, *MECW*, vol. 42, pp. 304-305

²⁵ (Karl Marx) 'Critical Marginal Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By A Prussian"' (Vorwärts! No. 60), *MECW*, vol. 3, pp. 194-195

²⁶ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798, pp. 375-6. Nature had been designed by God to promote self-improvement.



In subsequent writings in the 1850s and 1860s, Marx remained as insistent as he had been in 1844, that history and nature must be kept apart. In the *Grundrisse*, his first draft of *Capital*, written in the 1850s, his principal criticism directed at the theory of population was Malthus's attempt to conflate history and nature. Not only did he consider 'overpopulation as of the same kind in different historical phases of economic development', but he reduced

those very complicated and changing relations to one relation, in which, on the one hand the natural propagation of mankind, on the other the natural propagation of edible plants (or means of subsistence) confront each other as two natural series, the one geometric and the other arithmetic in progression. In this way he transforms historically distinct relations into an abstract numerical relation which he simply plucks out of thin air, and which is based on neither natural nor historical laws.

'The monkey', he went on, 'assumes that *the increase of mankind* is a purely natural process, which requires *external CONSTRAINTS, CHECKS*, if it is not to proceed geometrically'.²⁷ In *Capital*, Marx again repeated his main point about the conflation of history and nature, and at the same time added a sharper political edge:

It was of course, far more convenient and much more in conformity with the interests of the ruling classes, whom Malthus adored like a true priest, to explain this 'overpopulation' by the eternal laws of nature, rather than by the historical laws of capitalist production.²⁸

By contrast, in Engels' later writings, the position he had taken over from Feuerbach remained. In the 'unconscious state of mankind', as in Malthus, though for different reasons, human and natural history were conflated. In *Anti-Dühring*, human society, as much as the natural world, was subject to the Darwinian struggle and this would only come to an end with the disappearance of class society. According to Engels

The struggle for individual existence disappears. Then for the first time, man in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions into really human ones'.²⁹

In the years immediately after Marx's death, Engels did his best to erase any perceived difference between his own thinking and that of Marx. Let us remember that Marx had never mentioned 'the materialist conception of history'. Yet Engels introduced it as part of a supposedly joint project. In 1885 in an essay *On the History of the Communist League*, Engels recalled his first extended meeting with Marx in Paris in August 1844: 'When I visited Marx in Paris in the summer of 1844, our complete agreement in all theoretical fields became evident and our joint work dates from that time'. And he went on, 'when in the spring of 1845, we met again, Marx had already fully developed his materialist theory in its main features'.³⁰

These claims were misleading. Marx and Engels converged on certain points of current interest: the espousal of Feuerbach (though for somewhat different reasons), the adoption of a socialist rather than a republican agenda, and above all, a belief in the central importance of political economy. But Marx did not accept the fundamental continuity between natural and human history, as argued by the Darwinists.³¹ Darwin's theory could not accommodate Marx's belief that the first form of human society – the village community – preceded private property, patriarchy, and therefore class struggle too. Class struggle and competition were not the results of nature-driven necessity, but consequences of Man making his history in alien circumstances. For Marx, Man remained not just 'a natural being', but a *human* natural being', whose engagement in social struggle was a product of distinctively man-made social and cultural institutions. Class struggle and competition were not

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 524, 525

²⁸ Karl Marx, 'Capital, Volume One', *MECW*, vol. 35, p. 529

²⁹ Friedrich Engels, 'Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science', *MECW*, vol. 25, p. 270

³⁰ Friedrich Engels, 'On the History of the Communist League' (October 1885), *MECW*, vol. 26, p. 318

³¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 January 1861, *MECW*, vol.41, pp. 246-247



therefore to be regarded as resulting from the inherent animality of humans, but from heteronomy, the shaping of their behaviour by alien forces. It was private property and patriarchy, reinforced by religion, which had reduced man to an apparently animal condition, of which class struggle and competition were the expression.

Stepping back from the late nineteenth and twentieth century trend to align Marx and Darwin, we should restore Marx - speculatively at least - to the original historical and intellectual context in which he was formed. In this respect, it is important not only to situate Marx back in the 19th century, but also to locate him more precisely in the generation to which he belonged. His was a generation of writers, whose work on the transition from ancient to modern society preceded the impact of Darwin. It included Maine, Bachofen, McLennan and Morgan, who were all born between 1818 and 1827.³² All were lawyers, for whom the study of early or primitive society was not a branch of natural history, but of legal studies – of which political economy in the 19th century was often considered a part. The institutions upon which they focussed – private property, the state, marriage and the family – were also primarily legal. They were neither travel writers, nor social anthropologists in a later sense, even if Morgan made contact with the Iroquois and Maine became part of the Indian administration.³³

Their sources were mainly classical or biblical. They drew especially upon the Pentateuch, Roman law and Greek mythology – from the patriarchal despotism of Abraham, through the Ten Commandments and the Twelve Tables to Prometheus and the misdeeds of the Gods of Olympus, or to the rape of the Sabines and to the Caudine Forks. Fundamental to their concerns was an equation between history, development and progress, whether from ‘status’ to ‘contract’, from private property to the end of human pre-history, or from *societas* to *civitas*. All in their different ways believed that history was a means by which progress could be measured, a progressive movement from lower to higher stages of development, whether of forms of property, modes of production, types of kinship relation or marriage, custom or law. At its optimistic extreme, as Marx expressed it, history was the means by which man would make a complete return to himself as a social (i.e. human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development.

In his writings and notes made from the late 1860s to the time of his death, this sharp distinction between the historical and the natural was yet again recapitulated by Marx. He was particularly impressed by what he took to be convincing evidence of the existence in classical times of village communities, governed by local assemblies of citizens resting upon individual or tribal possession of the fields together with the sharing of ‘common preserves’ or ‘marks’ in the surrounding woods and pastures. Originally a Teutonic conception associated with Westphalia and Justus Möser, from 1815 onwards it was progressively extended first to the Russian *Mir*, and then to the Indian village as a component part of ‘Indo-European civilisation’. Such arguments were associated with a succession of writers, ranging from Karl Eichhorn, August von Haxthausen, Josef Grimm and Georg von Maurer to John Kemble and Henry Maine and Lewis Henry Morgan. Marx was particularly impressed by arguments for the antiquity and survival of the Russian peasant Commune from Nicolai Chernyshevsky and his followers and in response to a query from Vera Zasulich and the ‘Group for the Emancipation of Labour’ in 1881 committed himself to the defence of the Russian peasant commune and resistance to Russian capitalist development.

³² Henry Maine (1822-1888) was comparative jurist, whose most famous book, *Ancient Law* (1861), interpreted the development of law as a transition from ‘status to contract’. But his belief that primitive human society was patriarchal was widely challenged. More influential was the work of the Swiss lawyer and anthropologist, Johann Bachofen (1815-1887), particularly *Das Mutterrecht*, (Matriarchy) of 1861, which also argued that prehistoric human communities were governed by matrilineal descent and a matriarchal religion. Even more important in the English-speaking world was the work of John Mc Lennan (1827-1881), whose *Primitive Marriage* (1865) argued for the promiscuous exchange of women and goods in prehistoric societies, and that the prevalence of female infanticide led to ‘exogamy’ based upon the capture of women and a ‘rude practice of polyandry’. Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) drew on Mc Lennan’s work. He was a New York based railway lawyer, well-known for his study of the Iroquois, whose political institutions he compared with those of the tribes in Ancient Greece. His *Ancient Society* (1877) was greatly admired by Marx.

³³ For the impact made by these writers, see Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*, London, Routledge, 1991



But this was a set of beliefs, which by the 1880s was already beginning to look outmoded.³⁴ The historical evidence to support claims for the ‘mark’ village community were devastatingly attacked by the French historian, Fustel de Coulanges. In the case of the Russian *Mir*, far being a form of communal property dating back to pre-feudal times, Chicherin demonstrated that it was introduced in 1592 as ‘an act of despotic government’ by Czar Fedor Ivanovitch. Engels was therefore on strong ground, when in 1894, he attacked Chernyshevsky for encouraging ‘a faith in the miraculous power of the peasant commune to bring about a social renaissance’.

The alternative adopted by Engels, along with many other disenchanted 1848 revolutionaries was to place their hopes of progress in a form of ‘materialism’ allegedly in tune with the discoveries of natural science. It is not therefore surprising that the new generation of socialists of the 1870s and 1880s were happy to accept Engels’s claim that ‘When I visited Marx in Paris in the summer of 1844, our complete agreement in all theoretical fields became evident and our joint work dates from this time.’³⁵

Engels’ approach opened the way for the next generation to adopt a wholly Darwinian reading of what they understood to be a Marxist understanding of history. According to Plekhanov, the reputed ‘father of Russian Marxism’, politics and the relations of production were of secondary importance. Both ‘economy’ and ‘psychology’ as Plekhanov defined them were products of ‘the state of productive forces’, now equated with ‘the struggle for existence’. ‘The struggle for existence creates their economy, and on the same basis arises their psychology as well’.³⁶ Karl Kautsky, editor of *Neue Zeit*, and a major Marxist theorist of the Second International, made an even bolder conflation between human and natural history. He was particularly concerned to locate to prove the universality of the ‘social instincts in the plant, animal and human world’. It was these organic instincts and drives which Kautsky thought to underlie what philosophers had defined as ethics.

In the twentieth century, this assumption of a joint theory became a canonical point of orthodoxy among Communists, determined to defend the seamless unity of ‘Marxism’. This was maintained, even when material evidence appeared, suggesting that Marx’s approach had been different. In 1911, going through the papers of Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, the pioneer Marx scholar, David Ryazanov, came across several drafts of Marx’s letter to Vera Zasulich, endorsing what had subsequently become known as the Narodnik populist defence of the viability of the peasant commune; and 1923 Marx’s actual letter turned up. So thoroughly had the Engels ‘materialist’ and Darwinist reading of Marx triumphed, that none of the surviving members of the 1883 Geneva group for the Emancipation of Labour remembered receiving such a letter.

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³⁴ See, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, Penguin, 2016, ch. 12. ‘Back to the Future’, pp. 535-589

³⁵ Friedrich Engels, ‘On the History of the Communist League’, *MECW*, vol. 26, p. 318

³⁶ G. Plekhanov (N. Beltov), *The Development of the Monist View of History*, (1895) Moscow, 1956, p. 166