

Marx and Darwin. Thinkers in historical context.

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New ideas are not coming out of thin air. They are born in somebody's mind. In the mind of a human who is living in certain place, time and is influenced by ideas of others. Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882) and Karl Marx (1818 - 1883) were among the greatest minds of XIX century. Both of them were well-educated and stayed on a cutting edge of intellectual technologies (science, philosophy, art etc) of their time.

Marx wrote that Darwin used "clumsy English style of argument" is the "On the origin of Species" [1]. What did he mean by that? English philosophical tradition of the time was very different from the continental one. Utilitarianism and romanticism were the key intellectual movements in England. They were opposing each other but Darwin managed to utilize both in his work.

Utilitarians thought that everything shall be measured and put into the rational system. If something is not measurable, we should get rid of it [2]. They also promoted empiricism - an idea that major source of knowledge is a sensory experience. Darwin came to the theory of evolution through extensive sensory experience (Beagle voyage took almost five years) and putting the data collected from the field into rational system. But was he "pure" utilitarian? "On the origin of Species" states [3]:

Can we wonder, then, that nature's productions should be far "truer" in character than man's productions; that they should be infinitely better adapted to the most complex conditions of life, and should plainly bear the stamp of far higher workmanship?

Darwin loved nature, was inspired by it. This is not very common for utilitarians but typical for romantics. Love to the nature was one of the key ideas of romanticism. William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850), one of the leading English romantics, expressed this feeling in his beautiful verses [4]:

Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

This philosophy perfectly fits to Darwin's attitude to the nature. Romantic attitude. My conclusion is that Darwin had a romantic heart which inspired him to be interested in nature and motivated to study it. But his scientific methodology was mostly utilitarian. It might be that this interesting mix was called "clumsy English style" by Marx.

But what about Marx himself? What was his style? He was German. He was a philosopher. Hence, it is not a surprise that he was deeply influenced by the great German philosophical tradition. Bruno Bauer (1809 - 1882) acted as a middleman between the major figure in German idealism, Georg Hegel (1770 - 1831), and Marx. Bauer was Hegel's student and Marx's tutor. Marx took Hegel's dialectical method but connected it with English labor theory [6]:

We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws.

It resulted in the idea of class struggle as a driving force for the history [7]:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

In addition to these two major components Marx was inspired by French radicalism. He was very different from philosophers of the past in the way he understood the mission of the philosophy. This famous phrase from his early work (*Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845) is engraved upon his tomb:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.

This position can be traced back to the traditions of French Enlightenment (and later, French Revolution) which hoped to change the world for the better through radical actions.

What can we conclude?

- First, it is clear that neither Darwin nor Marx formulated their ideas without any influence from the past. In fact, opposite is correct.
- Second, it looks like that creative combination of different ideas of the past can contribute a lot to creation of a grand new idea. Creation of something which is revolutionary (like Darwin's evolution theory or Marxism).
- And last but not the least, the creator of the new idea is an active recipient of the past ideas. Not a passive one. E.g., Marx decided to take French radicalism, English labour theory and Hegel's dialectics. But he rejected Kant's "middle course" in favor of French radicalism regardless of the fact that Kant's tradition was much closer to him (as German philosopher) than French ideas.

References

1. Karl Marx. *Marr-Engels Correspondence 1861. Marx To Ferdinand Lassalle In Berlin.*
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3. Charles Darwin. *On the origin of Species (1859).*
4. William Wordsworth. *The Tables Turned (1798).*
5. Michael S. Roth. *From Enlightenment to Revolution, part 4 of 5. Video lecture.*
6. Karl Marx. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Estranged Labour.*
7. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto (1848).*