H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Weikart. *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein.* San Francisco, Calif.: International Scholars Publications, 1998. viii + 257 pp. $80.45 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57309-290-6.

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Published on H-Ideas (March, 2001)

The Political Selection of Ideology

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In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin unleashed a torrent of scientific and social controversy that has yet to recede fully. Both men's theories challenged the political, social, scientific, and moral ordering of society. Yet, neither man could control his legacy. Darwin's ideas were bastardized and popularly misunderstood as Social Darwinism, while the ever-sensitive Marx was so distraught over the corruption of his ideas that he once commented that he was not a Marxist. Indeed, their fates were intertwined in more ways than one, for social theorists looked to science for legitimacy. Socialist theoreticians in particular prided themselves on their broad reading and scientific methodology.

Exploring just one overlap of scientific and social theory, Richard Weikart presents a rich intellectual history of prominent German socialist theorists' reception of Darwinism in the nineteenth century. With each chapter organized around an individual theoretician, Weikart's work wades through an impressive array of primary source material including published books, articles, speech manuscripts, and some previously unknown correspondences to reveal a heterogeneous, inconsistent, and dynamic relationship between German socialists and contemporary science. Indeed, Weikart's main thesis claims, "The German socialists' reception of evolutionary theory illustrates the mutual interpretation of scientific and social thought" and "Social theory dictated the extent to which Darwinism was accepted in socialist circles" (pp. 2-3).

First and foremost, Weikart sets out to explore the "interconnectedness of scientific and social thought" (p. 223), specifically the impact of Darwinism on socialist revisionism. Weikart asks, did the gradualist evolution in Darwin's theory of nature inform an evolutionary view of socialism in opposition to a revolutionary theory?- Alongside this central theme, Weikart includes a chapter on "The Role of Biologists" and engages in brief forays into Darwinism's effect on socialism's view of eugenics, race, and religion, all of which provide tantalizing introductions into the breadth of evolutionary and Social Darwinistic thought at all levels of socialist theory – a phenomenon many prefer to relegate to the German Right.

By the phrase "socialist Darwinism," Weikart consciously distances the integration of Darwinism into socialist thought from the more widely used Social Darwinism. And here is one of Weikart's consistently illuminated arguments – that leading socialists did not accept the direct application of Darwinism to society; rather, based on the uniqueness of man, they separated Darwin's natural theory from socialist social theory. Indeed, the inability to reconcile the two led many leaders to embrace non-Darwinian evolutionary theories. For this argument, Weikart presents a complex constellation of ideologies: Marxist (Marx, Engels, Bebel, Bernstein, and a mature Kautsky) and non-Marxist (Lange, Buechner, Dodel, the young Kautsky) socialism; Darwinian and non-Darwinian (especially Tremaux and Lamarck) evolutionary theory; and non-socialist proponents and opponents of various strands of evolutionary theory. In this confusing intellectual maelstrom, it is not surprising, as Weikart reveals, that Marxists, including Marx, proved inconsistent.

Weikart avoids the temptation of a theoretical teleology that culminated in the abandonment of revolutionary principles first in the war crisis of 1914 and later in the Bad Godesberg Program of 1959. Instead, Weikart reveals the "ambiguous relationship" (p. 221) of German socialism to Darwinism. The inconsistent and even contradictory approach to the increasingly popular and popularized theories of natural selection appears on every page. The rich correspondence between intellectual and political leaders exposes the tension and uncertainty towards Darwinism that lay beneath the common perception of a

homogeneously positive reception by socialists.

The men (and there are only men) whose ideas fill the pages are all well-known to any historian of the nineteenth century: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Friedrich Albert Lange, Ludwig Buechner, August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, and Eduard Bernstein. And one might initially be inclined to think that Weikart travels a well-worn path. Weikart's strength, however, is to bring new sources and a problematized perspective. Yet he never dares to venture beyond the viewpoints of these giants. While the study is about reception, Weikart includes only the lofty peaks of the socialist movements. Admittedly, he defines his subject as the "leading theorists and propagandists" (p. 8), but even here, he has excluded important socialists such as Lassalle with the justification that Darwinism was not "particularly significant in their thought" (p. 8).

Yet Lassalle was more widely read by rank-and-file socialists than either Marx or Engels. Does this not make his disinterest in Darwin of interest? Also, where, as in Chapter V, "August Bebel's Popularization of Evolution," the promise of a broader perspective emerges, this use of "popularization" is understood as elite propaganda rather than popular reception. At no point do the rank and file Social Democrats, the Free Trade Unionists, the members of ancillary organizations, or the broader circles of non-joining sympathizers and family members enter the discussion. Bebel's goal may clearly have been to inculcate a harmonious synthesis of a non-Darwinian evolutionary theory with Marxism, but the reader ultimately has no sense of the success of this effort.

This is disappointing. German socialism was a mass movement with multiple potentialities and counter-currents expressed by those who identified to varying degrees with socialism and often understood Marxism and Darwinism in heterodox ways. The role of Darwin's *Descent* on Kautsky's conversion to materialism and ultimately socialism found similar parallels among everyday workers, many of whom never made the transformation to Kautsky's orthodox Marxism. Indeed, Alfred Kelly, who provides the foreword to the book, has shown in his collection of working-class autobiographies that socialist workers eagerly read evolutionary theory but often espoused Social Darwinist ideas without sensing any contradiction with the Marxist Erfurt Program.

At times, Weikart's exclusive focus on elites leads to paradoxical conclusions. For example, Weikart convincingly displays that Bebel and post-Marx leaders of the SPD drew upon practical experience and multiple ideological sources rather than Darwin to inform their increasingly evolutionary approach to social revolution. But he dismisses the influence of evolutionary theory as "making no inroads" into their ideas (p. 151). Here, the distance of Weikart's study from popular reception blurs the negotiated (dare I say dialectical) relationship between theoreticians and their social/intellectual context. While Weikart clearly situates Marx and nineteenth-century biologists as products of their time, deeply infused with prevailing attitudes, he would have the reader minimize this same contextual structuring inside socialist circles a few decades later.

In the end, however, Weikart provides a methodically written, cogently argued, and impressively documented intellectual history. He shatters two dominant myths: that Marxists applied Darwinism directly to social theory and that "the introduction of evolutionary biological ideas into socialist theory in the late nineteenth century stripped Marxism of its revolutionary edge by replacing dialectical materialism and praxis with mechanical materialism, and by fostering gradualism" (p. 149). While this reviewer would have enjoyed an expanded discussion of the ultimate significance of this topic by including the reception and thus broader significance of these ideas among regular Germans, both socialist and non-socialist, as an intellectual history *Socialist Darwinism* brings a freshly problematized analysis to an important chapter of socialist and indeed social intellectual history.

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Citation: Robert William Goodrich. Review of Weikart, Richard, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein.* H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5020

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