

CHARLES DARWIN, KARL MARX AND MARTIN WICKRAMASINGHE

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For about 20 years, I had the privilege and pleasure of enjoying the friendship of Sri Lanka's most prolific and fertile writer Martin Wickramasinghe. He was the best read man I have known personally. He was a great admirer of the work of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. He wrote extensively about their life and work. He spoke so knowledgeably and enthusiastically about their writings that he could not fail to communicate something of his excitement to me. Unlike the vast majority of educated people, Martin Wickramasinghe had actually read *The Origin of Species* and *Das Kapital*, or more accurately, its English translation titled *Capital*. These works were unarguably the foremost intellectual documents of the 19th century. He could talk learnedly and insightfully about the profound influence that the work of Darwin and Marx exerted on humankind. It was under Martin Wickramasinghe's influence that I developed a more than superficial interest in Darwinism and Marxism.

In his book titled *Revolution and Evolution* published in 1971, Martin Wickramasinghe gives an interesting account of his visit to the Darwin Museum in Kent, England, in 1967. Darwin's house was called Down House. As Martin Wickramasinghe recounts it in his essay, in 1952 Down House was converted into the Darwin Museum by the Royal College of Surgeons of England. It was this Museum that Martin Wickramasinghe had visited. In the essay about his visit he has included a facsimile of the title page of Karl Marx's magnum opus *Das Kapital* on which Karl Marx had inscribed the words: "To Mr. Charles Darwin on the part of his sincere admirer Karl Marx". It is dated 16 June 1873. His address is given as 1, Modena Villas, Maitland Park.

The aim of this article is to set the record straight concerning a widely held major misconception about Marx in relation the Darwin, to which I too subscribed. It was my recent reading of a fascinating biography of Karl Marx by Francis Wheen published in 1999 that served to disabuse my mind of several wrong notions I held about Karl Marx. In particular I firmly believed that Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) had devoutly wished to dedicate *Das Kapital* to his senior contemporary Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) which honour Darwin had politely declined.

Darwin Museum

In his essay Martin Wickramasinghe says that for him one of the most interesting sections of the Darwin Museum was the large room in which, among other things, volumes and books

presented by various people to Darwin are displayed. He states that in this section he noticed the "complimentary copy of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* in German with Marx's signature and the dedicative inscription in English". Martin Wickramasinghe then informs us that Dr. S A Barnett, editor of the centenary publication titled *A Century of Darwin*, had roundly declared that the autographed copy of Marx's *Das Kapital* sent to Darwin "remains uncut". Martin Wickramasinghe's interpretation of Dr. Barnett's remark is that Dr. Barnett wished to imply that Darwin cared little for socialism and had not even bothered to read the copy of Marx's magnum opus gifted to him. Concerning this matter Martin Wickramasinghe cautiously wrote: "If I am not mistaken the open copy of *Das Kapital* which is displayed in a glass case at the Down House has *many* cut pages. Darwin's letter to Karl Marx which is in the same glass case corroborates my guess that he read *several* pages of *Das Kapital*. This is Darwin's letter to Karl Marx which I had to copy in a hurry because we were lingering in the Museum after its closing hour" (*italics added*). He then reproduces in his book the letter which is remarkably accurate considering the circumstances under which he had copied it. The relevant original letter received by Marx in October 1873 goes like this:

Downe, Beckenham, Kent

Dear Sir,

I thank you for the honour which you have done me by sending me your great work on *Capital* & I heartily wish that I was more worthy to receive it, by understanding more of the deep & important subject of political Economy. Though our studies have been so different, I believe that we both earnestly desire the extension of Knowledge, & that this is in the long run sure to add to the happiness of Mankind.

I remain, Dear Sir
Yours faithfully,
Charles Darwin

Complimentary Copy

Martin Wickramasinghe's guess that Charles Darwin had read "several pages" of *Das Kapital* was right. It is now firmly established that only the first 105 pages of the 822 - page volume had been cut open. The pertinent question is that if Darwin had read only "several pages" of *Das Kapital*, how he went

so far as to refer to it as "your great work on Capital". Without undue seriousness, I offer the following explanation. Although we regard *Capital* primarily as a scientific treatise on economics, Marx himself regarded it as "a work of art". On 31 July 1865 i.e. two years before the publication of *Das Kapital*, Marx wrote to Engels: "... I cannot bring myself to send anything off, until I have the whole thing in front of me ... Whatever shortcomings they may have, the advantage of my writings is that they are an *artistic whole*" (italics added). In other words, for Marx *Das Kapital* was more like poetry than like science - or shall we say - it was something like "scientific poetry". Nobel-prize winning poet T. S. Eliot, who ought to have known what he was talking about once said that, "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood". So it seems to me that for Charles Darwin to have intuitively sensed the greatness of *Das Kapital* it was not necessary for him to read and understand all the words in it. What a pity, though, that he had not read Chapter X on "The Working Day" and Chapter XXV on "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation".

At all events, it is a fact that although Marx lived in England from 1849 until he died in 1883, it was in England that he was least known. Writing in the *Contemporary Review* of October 1881 the economist John Rae commented: "His word has gone into all the earth and evoked in some quarters echoes which governments will neither let live nor let die; but here, where it was pronounced, its sound has scarcely been heard". It is on record that when Karl Marx was buried on 17 March 1883 in Highgate cemetery, in the very plot where his wife Jenny Marx had been laid 15 months earlier, only 11 mourners were present. No matter. In 1999 when the British Broadcasting Corporation asked its world-wide listeners to identify the greatest men and women of the second millennium after Christ, the listeners' choice for "greatest thinker" was Karl Marx. Charles Darwin himself was fourth, after Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton in that order.

Dedication

There is no question that Darwin and Marx were the two most original and revolutionary thinkers of the 19th Century. They were contemporaries and for much of their adult lives they lived just 20 miles apart. Even so, there is no evidence that they ever met. There were people who were close friends of both Darwin and Marx. After reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* which was published in 1859 Marx had written to Engels saying that "this is the book which contains the basis in natural history for our view". When Marx's *Das Kapital* was first published in 1867, it was ostentatiously dedicated to Wilhelm Wolff with the words printed as follows:

Dedicated
To My Unforgettable Friend
Wilhelm Wolff
Intrepid, Faithful
Noble Protagonist of the Proletariat

Born in Tarau on June 21, 1809
Died in exile in Manchester on May 9, 1864

There was a special reason for this fulsome eulogistic dedicatory inscription. In 1864 Wolff had died bequeathing to Marx £ 820. In those days, this was a colossal sum of money. It greatly exceeded all that Marx had ever earned from his writing. It was a windfall for Marx and his family and enabled them to lead a bourgeois life for about 10 years. When the first volume of *Das Kapital* was published three years after the death of Wolff, Marx must have felt impelled to dedicate it to Wolff. After correcting the last proof of Volume I of *Das Kapital* on 16 August 1867, Marx wrote the following note to Engels: "So this volume is finished. I owe it to you alone, that it was possible. Without your self-sacrifice for me I could not possibly have managed the immense labour demanded by the three volumes. I embrace you, full of thanks".

Myth of Rebuff

Thus, there is no reason to suppose that Karl Marx ever wanted to dedicate *Das Kapital* to Charles Darwin. If anyone really merited the honour it was Engels his junior partner, for having made it possible at all. But dedicating a book to a junior partner might have seemed an odd thing to do. So the honour went to his biggest one-off financial benefactor Wilhelm Wolff. Charles Darwin was not at all in the running for this honour. How, then, did the widely believed myth generate itself that Karl Marx yearned to dedicate his *Das Kapital* to Charles Darwin who politely declined the honour? It had to do with a beautifully written, very widely read biography of Karl Marx by the famous Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin published in 1939. It was titled *Karl Marx, His Life and Environment*. In this book Berlin categorically asserted that Marx wished to dedicate the original German edition of his magnum opus to Darwin "for whom he had a greater intellectual admiration than for any other of his contemporaries". He went on to say that "Darwin declined the honour in a polite, cautiously phrased letter...". How did Berlin reach this conclusion?

Second Letter

In 1931 a Soviet newspaper had published the following letter dated 13 October 1880 written by Charles Darwin.
Downe, Beckenham, Kent

Dear Sir,

I am much obliged for your kind letter & the Enclosure. -The publication in any form of your remarks on my writings really requires no consent on my part, & it would be ridiculous in me to give consent to what requires none. I shd prefer the Part or Volume not to be dedicated to me (though I thank you for the intended honour) as this implies to a certain extent my approval of the general publication, about which I know nothing. - Moreover though I am a strong advocate for free thought on all subjects, yet

it appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; & freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follow from the advance of science. It has, therefore, always been my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science. I may, however, have been unduly biased by the pain which it would give some members of my family, if I aided in any way direct attacks on religion,- I am sorry to refuse you any request, but I am old & have very little strength, & looking over proof-sheets (as I know by present experience) fatigues me much.-

I remain Dear Sir
Your faithfully,
Ch. Darwin

Perverse Logic

Having presumably perused the two Darwin letters in question, perhaps with the kind of indifference to historical time worthy of the first-rate philosopher he was, Isaiah Berlin had noticed that one of the letters proved beyond any doubt that Darwin had turned down an offer of having a book dedicated to him. With a logic unworthy of a third-rate politician he had jumped to conclusion that the book in question must have been the original German edition of Marx's *Das Kapital*. From the contents of the other letter Berlin had concluded that despite Darwin's rebuff he had presumed, Marx had sent Darwin an autographed copy of *Das Kapital*. Ignoring the dates of the two letters, Berlin fitted the contents of the two letters and the fact of the existence of Marx's complimentary copy of *Das Kapital* to Darwin into what should be dubbed as his "Darwin's-rebuff-of-Marx theory". Because Berlin's biography of Marx was so widely read, his theory became gospel on the subject ever since.

For my part I cannot persuade myself that Isaiah Berlin was as daft or as chronologically insensible as his theory implies. I suspect that the name of his game here was somehow to make those without access to the original documents to believe that the great scientist Darwin had snubbed Marx and yet the rebuffed Marx was toady enough to have sent Darwin a complimentary copy of *Das Kapital*. His strategy worked remarkably well and the myth of Darwin's-rebuff-of-Marx theory was believed by all and sundry interested in Marxology, even after it had been busted by Margaret A. Fay. She did so in an article titled "Marx and Darwin; A Literary Detective Story" which was published in the *Monthly Review* of March 1980. Thus even in 1998, infamous Marx-baiter Paul Johnson wrote: "Unlike Marx, Darwin was a genuine scientist who on a famous occasion politely but firmly refused Marx's invitation to strike a Faustian bargain". I myself believed this foul canard until I read Francis Wheen's book the other day.

Busting the Myth

As we have noted already, of the two relevant Darwin letters, the letter of thanks had been written in 1873, and the letter of declination or formal refusal in 1880. On Berlin's theory, in 1880, Darwin had declined the honour of dedication of the first German edition of *Das Kapital* which was published in 1867. That is to say, the book in question had been published at least 13 years *before* Darwin had allegedly refused the dedicatory honour. Even a dimwit can spot this chronological conundrum. To me the only explanation that suggests itself for this conundrum is a tongue in cheek one based on Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. In the 1930s when Berlin was writing his biography of Marx, Albert Einstein - then at the height of his fame - had visited Oxford and relativity was very much in the air. For simplicity's sake the relativity explanation of the chronological conundrum at issue may be set out as follows:

Question: Could a letter sent in 1880 have reached its intended recipient in 1867?

Answer: Not impossible, according to the theory of relativity
Evidence: (quoted from memory)

'There was a young lady called Bright
Who traveled much faster than light
She set off one day
In a relative way
And came back the *previous* night

Theoretically, therefore, it was not impossible even for a letter posted in 1880 to have reached its destination during a *previous* year.

A more cogent tongue in cheek explanation of the conundrum was proposed by Professor Shlomo Avineri. In a paper published in *Encounter* magazine in 1967, he surmised that the political implications of Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence, made it "quite unthinkable" for the great communist to have sought the great evolutionist's imprimatur. Implicitly accepting Darwin's-rebuff-of-Marx theory as gospel, and taking into account the undeniable fact of the existence of the autographed copy of *Das Kapital* sent by Marx to Darwin in 1873, Professor Avineri indulged the desperate speculation that Marx's inscription on it must have been written with "tongue in cheek".

As a graduate student in the University of California, when Margaret A. Fay read Professor Avineri's article in 1974, she found his tongue in cheek explanation for Marx's inscription a little hard to swallow. She decided to research the matter afresh and quite by chance hit upon a slim volume called *The Students' Darwin* by Edward B. Aveling published in 1881. It was known that Aveling had been the lover of Marx's daughter Eleanor Marx. The publication date of *The Students' Darwin* - 1881 - and the date of

Darwin's letter of declination - 1880 - immediately triggered in Fay's mind the question: Could Darwin's letter of 1880 have been written to Aveling and not to Marx? To cut a long story short, she conclusively proved that her hunch was right by the following sequence of steps.

Sequence

1. She established that *The Students' Darwin* was the second volume in a series called "The International Library of Science and Free Thought" edited by the militant atheists Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh. This explained the reference in Darwin's letter written in 1880 to "the Part or Volume of a more general publication about which I know nothing" and his reluctance to be associated with "arguments against christianity and theism".

2. Fay discovered among Darwin's papers at Cambridge University Library a letter from Edward Aveling dated 12 October 1880, attached to a few sample chapters from *The Students' Darwin*. After requesting "the illustrious support of your consent" Aveling had added that "I purpose again, subject to your approval to honour my work and myself by dedicating the former to you". This is the dedicatory honour that Darwin had politely declined.

(The only thing that puzzles me about Aveling's letter is its date: 12 October 1880. The letter expressing Darwin's polite rebuff is dated 13 October 1880. One wonders why humankind had to invent e-mail at all!)

3. Fay demonstrated how Darwin's letter to Aveling ended up in the Marx archive. In 1895, after the death of Engels, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling had sorted out Marx's letters and manuscripts. Two years later Aveling wrote an article about Darwin and Marx. In this he quoted the 1873 letter of thanks from Darwin to Marx. He then went on to say that he too had corresponded with Darwin, without giving my details. Having written this article he had filed all his research materials in one folder. The juxtaposition of Darwin's letter to Aveling, with Darwin's letter to Marx explains how the mystery and myth of Darwin's alleged rebuff of Marx was born.

Conclusions

We can now claim to know the following.

1. There is no evidence that Marx yearned to dedicate his *Das Kapital* to Darwin.
2. Darwin did not write to Marx declining the honour that was allegedly offered.
3. Martin Wickramasinghe's "guess" that Darwin had read *several* pages of the *many* cut pages of *Das Kapital* was spot on. The word "several" means more than two but less than "many". Darwin had read only "several pages" of *Das Kapital* before dashing off his note of thanks to Marx.

Charles Darwin was certainly not the last person on earth to have read only "several pages" of Marx's great work. An Oxford-educated one time Oxford don, who became a Prime Minister of Britain, Harold Wilson, once boasted that he had not read beyond page two of *Capital*. Another Oxford-educated British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is a critic of Marx without providing evidence that he has read him at all. Not all Oxonians, however, have been hostile to Marx. A brilliant product of Oxford Harold J. Laski was perhaps the most influential British Marxist ever. But he was exceptional.

Indeed, during Marx's life-time itself a British barrister called Sir John MacDonnell wrote in the *Fortnightly Review* of March 1875: "Though Marx has lived much in England, he is here almost the shadow of a name. People may do him the honour of abusing him; read him they do not".

Today, those who *do not wish* to understand globalization and its discontents *should not read* Karl Marx.

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