

Materialism and the power of competition in darwin

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Materialism, the belief that the natural world, as well as man's social and economic circumstance were governed by inexorable laws and phenomena, is at the heart of nineteenth century philosophy. For these men, the discovery of principles like gravitation and thermodynamics, which govern the natural world, prove that an understanding of the universe is within man's grasp. The investigation of the natural world would no longer be constrained by religious dogma or moral certainty.

Instead, a reliance on man's powers of observation, as well as his rational faculties could tide him to a comprehensive understanding of the physical world, as well as the progress of human society. Marx's historical materialism and Darwin's evolutionary theory of natural selection are examples that reflect this philosophical trend. Both views describe a progress, which is historically inevitable. Progress within the natural world, as well as human society, would no longer be divinely guided. In a universe no longer governed by divine force, history could no longer be explained as moving inexorably toward final divine judgment.

Rather, history and human progress must now be explained by an internal self-directed energy. The nature of this force had been anticipated a generation earlier by Thomas Malthusian. It is the power of competition. For Darwin, this competition between animals of different species and among members of the same species was a competition for both for scarce resources, as well as reproductive dominance. This was an example of survival of those best adapted to their environment, or what he termed survival of the fittest. For Marx, similar competitive forces were at work throughout human history.

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He argues that all facets of humanity are attributable to man's material circumstances. Consequently, he argues there would be a natural antagonism between those who controlled the means of production and those who labor for them. This competitive tension, which he termed class struggle, was the motivating force for historical progress. Marx and Darwin then share common roots in materialism. The evolution of species and the progress of humanity, as described by these men, share a common source in the power of competition as an objective motivator for adaptation within the natural world and progress in human civilization.

In Marxist ideology, the history of civilizations reflects a continuous struggle between those in positions of wealth and power and those who are exploited by them. This conflict has been described as class struggle. Class struggle is identified in each historical era. Medieval society was characterized by a complex arrangement of social classes, including lords, the vassals, tradesmen and serfs. The organization of society always reflected the antagonism between the powerful who ruled and the powerless who were ruled by them.

The dissolution of the complex medieval social arrangement was brought on by the Industrial Revolution. The seeds for the collapse of the old order were sown by a change in the material circumstances of society, medieval society, was however, considerably simpler than the one it replaced. The new material conditions of production meant there would be a tension between those who own the means of production and those who labor for them. In nineteenth-century industrial society, class conflict pitted the industrial

entrepreneurial class, the bourgeoisie against the toiling masses or proletariat.

This success of the bourgeoisie was made possible by the increasing demand for capital necessary to enhance Europe's growing industries. The impetus for the creation of this class was the expansion of trade during the age of exploration. Trade expansion, beginning with exploration, created a growing demand for raw materials and manufactured products. The increasing scale of industrial demand outstripped the capacity of medieval guilds to supply manufactured goods. Large-scale manufacturing was necessary to meet this new demand.

Industrial expansion requires larger volumes of capital, which meant that new forms of financing were needed to underwrite industrial expansion. The need for capital requires the creation of a new class of financiers, as well as new industrial leadership, the bourgeoisie. The failure of the old medieval system was the result of its inability to adapt to the changes in industrial production, necessitated by growing market forces. The success of the new Industrial order made the bourgeoisie rich and powerful, ultimately signaling the death of the old economic organization.

With this newfound wealth, the bourgeoisie was able to successfully displace the established aristocracy of the past and seize the reins of political power. The expansion of political rights during this period meant little more than the protection of the right of private property, which served to protect the economic gains of the Bourgeoisie. The state and its legal system became the handmaiden of the bourgeois class, serving to enhance its economic

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control. The ascendancy of the moneyed class meant the increasing transformation of society along monetary terms. In bourgeois society, money became the measure of all things.

A world defined by the conditions of the competitive market meant that the bourgeoisie needed to constantly innovate. This innovation meant greater productivity and the need to expand markets. While these forces succeeded in enhancing the wealth of the industrial class, it resulted in increasing exploitation of the working class. The increasing profitability of industrial production was made possible by improving worker productivity. This surplus value meant increasing profits for the factory owners at the expense of the very workers whose labor had made enhanced productivity possible.

But just as the changes in productive resources at the inception of the industrial age spelled the end of feudal society; the growing exploitation of the working class created by industrial overproduction would expose the contradictions of modern industrial society, triggering its downfall.

Overproduction and falling prices would precipitate a depression that would further depress wages and result in hardships for the laboring masses, ultimately threatening the security of bourgeois society.

As Marx describes it when he stated, "It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodic return put on trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire bourgeois society' (225-226). The very forces of production, which the bourgeoisie had harnessed to its advantage earlier, were now sowing the seeds of social instability for organization and resistance to bourgeois domination, fueling class conflict

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and revolution. Once again, as in the feudal period, it is the material circumstances and economic relationships of class that fuel social transformation.

Just as man's material circumstance created the dynamic for economic transformation; the forces of competition and conflict are vital for the evolution of species in the natural world. In Darwin's natural selection, traits that enjoy a imitative advantage for the species survive and are transmitted to successive generations. The variations in any one generation may appear minimal, however the cumulative impact of generations can be profound. Evolution of species is a selective process.

Those inherited variations in traits, which enjoy a selective advantage over other variants in the same trait, are successfully transmitted to the succeeding generation. Over time, this process of competitive selection, which he termed survival of the fittest, would result in significant changes in species, as well as, the creation of new species and subspecies. In deriving his theory of evolution based on competition, Darwin drew on the theories of Thomas Malthusian.

Malthusian proposed that populations that increase geometrically would be a constant competition for scarce resources in order to survive. All natural populations, like their human counterparts, would be under constant pressure to adapt to a harsh natural world of scarcity. The result was that only those populations, which were best adapted, would succeed. Then, the perfect adaptations we observe in nature are the byproduct of a brutal and morally indifferent process of selection.

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