Socialist Darwinism in Germany: 1875–1914

Richard Weikart aims to answer two related questions in his comprehensive analysis of the relationship between socialism and Darwinism in Wilhelmine Germany, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein*: first, how was the connection between historical materialism and Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection understood by nineteenth-century German Marxists; second, in the half-century up to the outbreak of the First World War, did the socialist Darwinism of the intellectual leadership of German Social Democracy entail the Party’s rightward political trajectory?

Few Marxists have doubted that the social evolutionism of the Second International played a role in its downfall, but how important was this factor when weighed against other aspects of its Marxism? In his essay ‘Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International’ Lucio Colletti argued that

German Social Democracy chose the ‘parliamentary road’ at Erfurt, not because it had already abandoned the class conception of the State, but because its ‘fatalistic’ and ‘providential’ faith in the automatic progress of economic evolution gave it the certainty that its eventual rise to power would come about ‘in a spontaneous, constant, and irresistible way, quite tranquilly like a natural process’.¹

Colletti argues that this evolutionary interpretation of Marxism was developed by Engels and Kautsky, and he compares it unfavourably to something he labels the voluntarist Marxism of the Third International. In contrast, Sebastiano Timpanaro, argues that, while Kautsky’s evolutionary theory of history played a part in his shift to the right, there were other, more substantial, problems with his political theory:

the real limitation of the Marxism of the Second International did not consist in a lack of voluntarism, but rather in a schematic and tenaciously Eurocentric

¹ Colletti 1972, p. 105.
'philosophy of history’, in a non-Marxist conception of the State, in an inadequate understanding of the imperialist phase of capitalism, and in a persistent illusion that the bourgeoisie was already and would become increasingly a peace-loving and ‘contented’ bourgeoisie, precisely when it was getting ready for more ambitious militarist and reactionary adventures.2

The background to this exchange was, of course, Lenin’s famous critique of Kautsky’s ‘renegacy’. In 1917, Lenin argued that Kautsky’s centrist was a corollary of his gloss over the central Marxist proposition that ‘the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without the destruction of the apparatus of state power’.3 Indeed, Lenin insisted, ‘Marx’s theory of the state . . . is inseparably bound up with the whole of his doctrine of the revolutionary role of the proletariat in history’, and, ‘those who recognise only the class struggle are not yet Marxists. . . . Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat’.4 According to Lenin, it was not because Kautsky’s Marxism included an evolutionary component that caused him to fail the test of war in 1914, rather his evolutionism, in the context of his rejection of Marx’s theory of the state, underpinned his break with the revolutionary soul of Marxism.

Does Weikart’s book offer us evidence from which we might adjudicate this debate? Weikart outlines the scale of enthusiasm for Darwinism in the late nineteenth-century German socialist movement, and shows that, while Darwinism did not entail socialism, it did lend itself, in the German context, to progressive and sometimes socialist political interpretation (pp. 10, 223). Similarly, while Darwinism was embraced by the revisionists within the socialist movement, there was no simple correlation between Darwinism and moderate socialist politics: all of the key Marxists who contributed to the debates of the period – revolutionaries, revisionists, and centrists – were, to a greater or lesser extent, proponents of Darwinism, and believed that Darwin’s theory of natural evolution did not contradict their models of socialism, and indeed generally believed that Darwinism underpinned their own socialist political perspectives. Given the plurality of political perspectives that were held by socialist Darwinists, Weikart argues, it was not the belief that Marxism included an evolutionary component related to Darwinism that caused the failure of the SPD to take a stand against war in 1914; rather, ‘practical political and economic developments account for [its] centrist position far better than the infiltration of biological evolution into socialist theory’ (p. 223). This argument implies that Colletti was mistaken: Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg were just

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2 Timpanaro 1975, p. 120.
4 Lenin 1968, pp. 280; 285.