Engels to Lavrov
12 November 1875

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The letter from Friedrich Engels to P.L. Lavrov, here published for the first time in English, has been specially translated and annotated from a facsimile of the original, kindly supplied to the LABOUR MONTHLY by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow.

London, 12th Nov., 1875.

My dear Monsieur Lavrov,[1]

Now that I have returned from a visit to Germany I have at last got to your article, which I have just read with much interest. Here are my observations upon it, written in German, as this enables me to be more concise.[2]

(1) Of the Darwinian theory I accept the *theory of evolution* but only take Darwin's method of proof (struggle for life, natural selection)[3] as the first, provisional, and incomplete expression of a newly-discovered fact. Before Darwin, the very people (Vogt, Buchner, Moleschott, etc.) who now see nothing but the *struggle* for existence everywhere were stressing precisely the co-operation in organic nature – how the vegetable kingdom supplies the animal kingdom with oxygen and foodstuffs while the animal kingdom in turn supplies the vegetable kingdom with carbonic acid and manures, as Liebig, in particular, had emphasised. Both conceptions have a certain justification within certain limits, but each is as one-sided and narrow as the other. The interaction

of natural bodies – whether animate or inanimate – includes alike harmony and collision, struggle and co-operation. If, therefore, a so-called natural scientist permits himself to subsume the whole manifold wealth of historical development under the one-sided and meagre phrase, "struggle for existence," a phrase which even in the sphere of nature can only be taken with a grain of salt, such a proceeding is its own condemnation.

(2) Of the three convinced Darwinists cited, Hellwald alone seems to be worth mentioning. Seidlitz is only a lesser light at best, and Robert Byr is a novelist, whose novel *Three Times* is appearing at the moment in *By Land and Sea* – just the right place for his whole rodomontade too.

(3) Without disputing the merits of your method of attack, which I might call a psychological one, I should myself have chosen a different method. Each of us is more or less influenced by the intellectual medium in which he chiefly moves. For Russia, where you know your public better than I do, and for a propagandist journal appealing to the bond of sentiment, to moral feeling, your method is probably the better one. For Germany, where false sentimentality has done and is still doing such enormous harm, it would be unsuitable, and would be misunderstood and distorted sentimentally. What we need is hate rather than love – to begin with, at any rate – and, above all, to get rid of the last remnants of German idealism and instate material facts in their historic rights. I should, therefore, attack these bourgeois Darwinists something after this fashion (and shall perhaps do so in time):-

The whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for existence is simply the transference from society to animate nature of Hobbes' theory of the war of every man against every man and the bourgeois economic theory of competition, along with the Malthusian theory of population. This feat having been accomplished – (as indicated under (1) I dispute its unqualified justification, especially where the Malthusian theory is concerned) – the same theories are next transferred back again from organic nature to history and their validity as eternal laws of human

society declared to have been proved. The childishness of this procedure is obvious, it is not worth wasting words over. But if I wanted to go into it further I should do it in such a way that I exposed them in the first place as bad *economists* and only in the second place as bad natural scientists and philosophers.

(4) The essential difference between human and animal society is that animals are at most *gatherers* whilst men are *producers*. This single but cardinal distinction alone makes it impossible simply to transfer the laws of animal societies to human societies. It makes it possible that, as you justly remark, "Man waged a struggle not only for existence but for enjoyment and for the increase of his enjoyments ... he was ready to renounce the lower enjoyments for the sake of the higher." Without contesting your further deductions from this, the further conclusions I should draw from my premises would be the following: – At a certain stage, therefore, human production reaches a level where not only essential necessities but also luxuries are produced, even if, for the time being, they are only produced for a minority. Hence the struggle for existence – if we allow this category as valid here for a moment – transforms itself into a struggle for enjoyments, a struggle no longer for the mere means of *existence* but for the means of *development*, *socially produced* means of development, and at this stage the categories of the animal kingdom are no longer applicable. But if, as has now come about, production in its capitalist form produces a far greater abundance of the means of existence and development than capitalist society can consume, because capitalist society keeps the great mass of the real producers artificially removed from the means of existence and development; if this society is forced, by the law of its own existence, continually to increase production already too great for it, and, therefore, periodically every ten years, reaches a point where it itself destroys a mass not only of products but of productive forces, what sense is there still left in the talk about the "struggle for existence?" The struggle for existence can then only consist in the producing class taking away the control of production and distribution from the class hitherto entrusted

with it but now no longer capable of it; that, however, is the Socialist revolution.

Incidentally it is to be noted that the mere consideration of past history as a series of class struggles is enough to reveal all the superficiality of the conception of that same history as a slightly varied version of the "struggle for existence." I should therefore never make that concession to these spurious natural scientists.

(5) For the same reason I should have given a different formulation to your statement, which is substantially quite correct, "that the idea of solidarity, as a means of lightening the struggle, could ultimately expand to a point at which it embraces all humanity, counterposing it as a solidarised society of brothers to the rest of the world of minerals, vegetables and animals."

(6) On the other hand I cannot agree with you that the war of every man against every man was the first phase of human development. In my opinion the social instinct was one of the most essential levers in the development of man from the ape. The first men must have lived gregariously and so far back as we can see we find that this was the case.

* * *

17th November. I have been interrupted afresh and take up these lines again to-day in order to send them to you. You will see that my remarks apply rather to the form, the method, of your attack than to its basis. I hope you will find them clear enough I have written them hurriedly and on re-reading them should like to change many words, but I am afraid of making the manuscript too illegible.

With cordial greetings,

F. ENGELS.

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1. Peter Lavrovitch Lavrov (1823-1900), artillery officer and Professor of Higher Mathematics at the School of Artillery in Petersburg, joined (1862) the early revolutionary organisation "Land and Freedom" of the Narodniki – who looked to the Mir (peasant village commune) as the basis of Russian emancipation. His famous *Historical Letters* (x168-9), which raised history and social progress to the same level of importance as natural science and emphasised the vast debt owed by the intelligentsia to the peasants and workers, had an immense influence on the "To the People" movement of the young intellectuals, whose concern hitherto had been mainly with natural science and utilitarian theory. Lavrov, banished in 1866, escaped to Paris (1870), joined the First International, put his military knowledge at the disposal of the Communards (1870), came to London to get help for them and so met Marx and Engels. He declared himself a Marxist, but never shed the "psychological method" to which Engels here mildly refers. His approach was always from the standpoint of the subjective individual and his ethical ideas; his *Essay on the History of Thought* (1875) treats evolution as the evolution of thought. At this period he was editing the journal *Vperyod* (Forward, 1873-78), and aimed at conciliation between his followers and the Bakunists ("Lavrov's soft sawder" Marx called it); he estranged both sections, left the movement because he disapproved of terrorism, but returned (1881) to the Narodovoltsi and gave them active literary help from then onwards.

2. The first and last paragraphs of the letter are written in French; the rest is in German, excepting the two quotations from Lavrov's article, and a few phrases, which are in Russian.

3. This parenthesis is written in English.

4. All references are to English editions unless otherwise indicated.

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The substance of this letter, omitting minor criticisms of Lavrov's article, will be found in one of the *Notes in Dialektik und Natur* (Marx-Engels Archiv. II., page 190 cf. page 282) the work on the dialectic of nature for which Engels was making preparatory studies

from 1873 onwards and which the death of Marx (1883) prevented him from completing.

(1) *Marx, Engels and Darwin*. Marx and Engels fully appreciated Darwin's great work. As Marx had discovered the law of development in human history so Darwin had discovered the law of development in organic nature, delivering the death-blow to teleology and mechanical determinism, furnishing proof of the dialectic of accident and necessity and giving the basis in natural science for the marxist theory of history. The three decisive 19th century discoveries which transformed natural science "from an empirical into a theoretical science .... a system of materialistic knowledge of nature" were the cell, the transformation of energy, and the theory of evolution called after Darwin. (Engels' speech at the graveside of Marx, letters and notes in the *Selected Correspondence, Ludwig Feuerbach*, pp.39-37, Anti-Dühring, pp.79-87)[4] Marx wished to dedicate to Darwin chapters 12 and 13 of the English edition of *Capital*, Vol. I. (Kerr edition, chapters 14 and 15), but Darwin refused the dedication (for his letter see LABOUR MONTHLY, November, 1931). These chapters deal with the division of labour in manufacture and society and the development of machinery and modern industry: "Darwin has interested us in the history of nature's technology, i.e., in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organisations, deserve equal attention?" (*Capital*, Vol. I., page 406, note.)

What Marx and Engels criticised from the first was Darwin's "crude English method" (Correspondence, pp. 125-126, Marx, *Theorien über den Mehrwert* (Dietz, 1905) Bd. II., 314, 315) in so naïvely adopting the Malthusian theory of "over-population" and the struggle for existence (see Darwin's Introduction (1860) to *The Origin of Species* and his *Autobiography*, chap. 2). See, however, Engels on Darwin in Anti-Dühring (p.79-87) and the later passage in *Natur and Dialektik* (Marx-Engels Archiv, Vol. II., p.282). For a full discussion from the biological standpoint see V. L. Komarov's essay in the symposium, *Marxism and Modern Thought* (Routledge, 1935).

(3) *Hobbes, Malthus, Darwin*. “It is remarkable how among beasts and plants Darwin recognises his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, ‘inventions’ and Malthusian ‘struggle for existence.’ It is Hobbes’ war of every man against every man and reminds one of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* where civil society figures as the ‘spiritual animal kingdom,’ whilst with Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society.” (Marx to Engels, June 18, 1862. *Gesamtausgabe* III., 3). See especially Engels’ letter to Lange and Note, Correspondence, pp. 198-202. For Hobbes (1588-1679) and the state of nature as “the war of every man against every man” – an argument for absolutist government reflecting the dual tendencies of the early bourgeois period – see *Leviathan* (1651), Engels’ Preface 1892 to *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, and his letter to Schmidt, 27 October, 1890; also B. Hessen, “The Social and Economic Roots of Newton’s Principia” in *Science at the Crossroads* (1931). The main thesis of Parson Malthus’ *Essay on Population* (1798 and 1805), which reflected the trade crisis, high prices and heavy poor-rates of the Napoleonic war period, was “that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man”; hence war, famine and pestilence plus “moral restraint” as necessary checks, and “over-population” as the incentive to endeavour. The Malthusian corollary that the poor should be stopped from breeding, to which practical expression was given in the new Poor Law of 1834, is an extreme variant, appearing under various pseudo-scientific guises in times of economic crisis, of the more constant implicit theory that “the lower classes must be kept poor or they will never be industrious” (Young). Both forms flourish to-day, see the statistics of Sir John Orr and Dr. G. C. M. M’Gonigle. Is nature or human society to blame for economic misery? was, roughly, the question which divided Malthus and his disciples from Godwin, Owen and the early Radical economists. That the fault lay with the property system and not with “nature” was reiterated by Cobbett (e.g., *Rural Rides, Political Register*) and the Chartists (see any Chartist paper on Malthus or Lord Brougham in the early thirties); in 1843 the young Engels gave the scientific answer when he attacked the “laws” of “diminishing productivity” and “over-population” in his *Outlines of a Criticism of Political Economy* (*Gesamtausgabe* I., 2), see Correspondence, pp. 32-33, 198, and for Ricardo’s theory of rent in this connection, pp. 27-33, Marx,

Capital, Vol. III., pp. 760-772 and *Theorien über den Mehrwert* (Bd. II. 304-317; cf III., 1-65). For facts see R.E. Prothero *English Farming* (1927), p.272, etc. The later combination of the free competition, self-help and survival of the fittest doctrine of the "free-traders" – of philosophic radicalism, utilitarianism and bourgeois Darwinism – composing the ideology of *laissez-faire*, though superficially familiar, has never been fully studied. As an introduction see references Marx-Engels Correspondence, pp. 34, 35, and for social illustration, Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (1926).

(4) "The essential difference between human and animal society." In *Work as the Factor in the Development of Apes into Men* (c.1876), Engels argues that the differentiation of the hand from the foot, accomplished after thousands of years of struggle, was the prerequisite of man's development from the ape. Specialisation of the hand means the tool, and the tool means the specific activity of man, the transforming reaction of man to nature – production. (Not, of course, implying the "Yankee" definition of man as "a tool making animal" cf. *Capital*, Vol. I., p.358.) Contrast Huxley's opposite valuation of the hand and foot, *Man's Place in Nature*, (*Collected Essays*, Vol. VII., p.130.) See too J.D. Bernal, *Engels and Science* (LABOUR MONTHLY Pamphlets No. 6, 2d. Cf. also Komarov op. cit.) Engels' fundamental dialectical conception is that expressed throughout *Capital* – that man the worker transforms himself in the process of transforming nature – work made man. The argument here is completed in par. 6 – "The social instinct," etc. "The first men must have lived gregariously." See *Capital*, Vol. I., p.386, and Engels' *Origin of the Family*.

"Capitalist society produces more than it can consume." Cf. *Correspondence*, pp. 198-202, and *Capital* Vol. I., ch. 32. "Periodically, every ten years" .... Marx and Engels studied the ten-year cyclic crises in England during the period of rising capitalism when Britain held the world trade monopoly. In 1886, Engels noted that since Britain had lost this monopoly "the period of crises as known hitherto is closed .... We have entered a period incomparably more dangerous to the existence of the old Society than the period of ten-year crises." (Letter to Bebel, January 20-23.) The "great depression" which marked our transition to the epoch of imperialism was only in its earliest stage in 1875.

Dona Torr.
