

## OLLI Lecture

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### “Start the Revolution without Me”

Leon Trotsky, the famed Russian revolutionary, once wrote that he observed the start of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when he saw a Cossack, one of the Czar’s most reliable and ruthless defenders, wink at a woman who was protesting the shortage of grain (and demonstrating for women’s rights) in March 1917. At that moment, Trotsky said, he knew that the downfall of the Czarist regime was at hand.

No one knows for sure when that same moment came in Paris in February, 1848, but it certainly did. Just as in 1789, the protestors tore up the streets of the city and erected barricades. Troops were unable to storm them successfully and finally the king, Louis Philippe (1830-1848), a constitutional monarch was forced to flee the country and seek asylum from Victoria and Albert in England. Of course, it hadn’t helped when the king’s prime minister, Francois Guizot (1787-1874), famously advised a group of visiting workmen who were seeking a greater voice for labor in the government that, if they wanted that, they should “Get rich!” Victor Hugo (1802-1885) immortalized these days in French history with his *Le Miserables* (1862) which continues in its Broadway version to captivate audiences everywhere.

The fall of the French monarchy in 1848 ushered in Second French Republic, followed by political instability, and finally the establishment of a carefully-disguised dictatorship (1851) under the Emperor Napoleon’s nephew, who came to style himself Napoleon III (1808-1873). The events of 1848 in Paris touched off political rioting across Europe that was so massive that:

- The Hapsburg family in Vienna was forced to flee to Insbruck while rebellions against them slowly failed in Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary.
- The Hohenzollerns in Berlin were obliged to grant their Prussian subjects a form of constitutional government which the dynasty subsequently

undermined. Germans, however, elected to a national convention that was convened in Frankfurt in 1848, seeking a constitutional monarchy for what would be a newly-born nation. The assembled delegates at this Frankfurt parliament offered the prospective German crown to King Frederick Wilhelm IV of Prussia (1840-1861). After profound consideration, he turned it down, stating that he would not accept a crown “from the gutter.” Victoria’s Albert had hoped passionately that this arrangement would be Germany’s path into the future. He was disappointed with the meager results of the 1848 revolution throughout Germany.

- Even more disappointed were the Poles who once more rebelled in the name of national independence against their Russian masters. They failed in their uprising but caused their ingenious child, Frederick Chopin (1810-1849) to write some of his masterpieces celebrating the Polish cause.

Even in sunny Italy, the political convolutions of 1848 encouraged the King of Piedmont/Sardinia (Charles Albert, 1831-1849) to dare to challenge the Austrian Empire in its dominance over the northern part of that country. Although his forces were eventually defeated, he did gain control of Lombardy (the Milan region) which would soon become the catalyst of the Italian nation. This momentous struggle and Austria’s victory is recalled every year when the Vienna Philharmonic performs Straus’s “Radetsky March” to cheering and clapping Viennese. It should be noted also that in the repression of this rebellion aerial bombs were used for the first time when the Austrians dropped explosives from hot air balloons over Venice.

Where were Victoria and Albert in all of this turmoil? The interesting answer is “they were observers only.” The Chartist mounted one last campaign in 1848 for the reform of parliament, but Britain remained quiet while these continental tragedies shook the foundations of Metternich’s Europe. Why was that? It’s a question that has intrigued historians ever since and still captures our attention to this day. Why is the United States so peaceful in its streets today while millions are unemployed and facing starvation? There’s no easy answer to that question; yet we know it has something to do with our culture. We are not easily inclined to

violent uprisings against our national government but when it happens it's a doozy! Take, for example, the events of 1860-61.

But revolution had, indeed, swept Europe and even though much of it had failed politically revolution was achieving dramatic results in the way people thought of themselves and their relationship to the universe. I would commend to you a still-admired volume entitled Darwin, Marx, and Wagner by Jacques Barzun. It is a brilliant study of how these three men (!!!) changed the intellectual world view of the Victorians. How can we describe what they did because the ramifications of their thoughts still move our world today and continue to be argued in our courts? Let me try to describe what these three Victorians did to or for us. For example:

- Charles Darwin (1809-1882) – The rather shy scion of a family that derived its wealth from the Wedgwood fortune, which allowed Charles to sign aboard “the Beagle” and observe nature during its 1834-1835 voyage across the Pacific collecting bread fruit and observing the region’s resources. At about the same time Alfred Wallace (1823-1913) was making the same kind of observations in what is now part of Indonesia (the Moluccas islands) and both came up with the same conclusions: **Life on this planet was and still is evolving and is not static in its forms** as many theologians had assumed.

Charles Darwin was not the first to come up with the idea of biological evolution. His own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) had published a book on the subject in 1794 called Zoonomia in which he argued convincingly for the concept of the evolution of species. Even the German polymath/author, Johann Goethe (1749-1832) had speculated grandly and publicly on the subject. Most of us now take for granted the idea that life on this planet has evolved over many millions of years, although even today some Americans cling to the idea advanced by Anglican Bishop James Ussher (1581-1656) in his famous Annals of the Old Testament, deduced from the First Origins of the World (1650). The good Bishop maintained that God had created life on earth as it existed

in 1650 in one gigantic act as it is described in the Book of Genesis. Based on his reading of that source, Ussher calculated that this marvel had begun on the night before Sunday October 23, 4004 B. C.

Even by Erasmus Darwin's day, few scientists embraced that worldview, especially as the new science of geology was emerging. Jefferson, for example, was intrigued by the "rockfish" found on what is now the Blue Ridge Parkway and searched for an explanation of their presence other than Noah's Great Flood. Those explanations were soon forthcoming. As geologists and engineers unearthed more and more of the world's ancient past it became clear that the planet was far older than Bishop Ussher had imagined and that Jefferson's rockfish could only be explained by a slow process of evolution. The classical statement of this view was published in 1801 by the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste de Monet, the Chevalier de la Marck (1744-1829), referred to then and now as "Lamarck." The volume was entitled Systeme des Animaux sans Vertebres which was followed by a multi-volume Histoire Natural (1815-1822). In these works, Lamarck not only amassed impressive evidence for biological evolution but even offered an explanation of how it happened, called "acquired characteristics" (parents passing along useful characteristics to their offspring).

It was that latter notion, "acquired characteristics" that came to trouble both Darwin and Wallace. Lamarck's gentle evolutionary theory allowed room for such pre-Victorian ideas as "inevitable progress" and even some divine plan unfolding. Darwin saw the mechanism of evolution as "natural selection," a blind unfolding of species development simply favoring those creatures that adapted most successfully to a changing environment. That's what he had observed among the finches while voyaging on the "Beagle." That's what Wallace had observed in the jungles of Malaysia a few years later. Darwin realized that his theory

eliminated (or at least did not necessitate) any divine plan, but realizing the controversial nature of his opinions he did not publish them for more than a decade. It was only when Alfred Wallace sent him a paper on his distant findings in 1858 that Darwin decided to go public with his views. They were first presented to the Linnaean Society in London on July 1, 1858 and then the following year were published under the title On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life. The first edition sold out in a single day.

It set off an intellectual explosion at first among intellectuals (spiritual and secular) and then, thanks to the rapidly-expanding popular press, a public argument whose ripples continue to this day. Perhaps the most famous of these debates took place at a meeting of the British Association at Oxford University in the summer of 1860. It pitted Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873), an Anglican bishop, against Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), Professor of Natural History at the Royal School of Mines. During that exchange Bishop Wilberforce inquired of Huxley if it were “through his grandmother or his grandfather that he claimed his descent from a monkey?” Huxley famously replied:

*If the question is put to me, would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great means of influence and yet employs those faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion, I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape.*

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I hope it is clear, therefore, that Charles Darwin was not the author of the idea of evolution. That concept was much a part of the intellectual universe in the nineteenth century and not only in the natural sciences. The great German philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), for example, made it a central part of his teachings at the University of Berlin. Hegel, probably the most influential philosopher of the Victorian Era, had been on hand in 1806 to witness personally the rout of the Prussian Army at Jena by Napoleon. He came to believe that Bonaparte at that moment represented the *zeitgeist* of the Age, the embodiment of an historical process that was moving inevitably toward a conclusion—a final synthesis. Hegel saw not only evolution in history but believed that he understood its process: new idea (thesis); opposition (antithesis); and reconciliation (synthesis). By this process history moved through the march of ideas inexorably forward toward perfection. Hegel called this historical process, “the dialectic.”

His ideas were all the rage at the University of Berlin and among those who imbibed them was a young student from Trier who was pursuing his doctoral studies in philosophy there. His name was Karl Marx (1818-1883) and he came from a Rhineland family of Jewish converts to Christianity who had eagerly encouraged young Karl’s advanced studies. Although Hegel had already stepped down from his teaching position at the University, Marx was ranked among the “Young Hegelians” who debated the implications of the Master’s thought into the late night (like graduate students anywhere). He also got caught up in the growing dissent in Berlin with the ruling Hohenzollern dynasty of Prussia. His political passions soon came to eclipse his doctoral studies and called him to the attention of the Prussian police. Harassed and occasionally arrested, Karl Marx fled Berlin and took up radical journalism eventually in Paris (prior to the 1848 revolution there). In the course of that sojourn, he met Friedrich Engels (1820-1895)), the son of a wealthy Prussian cotton manufacturer, and just on the eve of the Paris uprising of

1848 they published “The Communist Manifesto.” It began with the ringing words “Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains.”

At first, hardly anyone noticed the document because there were so few “communists” in Paris at the time. There were a growing number of socialists, however, and it was among them that Marx and Engels slowly gained a following. I could teach a whole course on this subject and, since many of us are products of the late “Cold War,” I won’t yet go into the details of how Marxism would so often become synonymous with socialism in the Victorian era. Still, I want you to notice how the idea of evolution is so central to what became known as Marxism. As he hinted in “the Manifesto” and went on to explain at far greater length in his later writings (including his masterpiece, *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx came to critique Hegel by denying that history moved through the dialectical march of ideas; rather, he argued, it was moved by a process of “dialectical materialism” – the eternal war of the classes over the ownership of the means of production. Thus in ancient times the slaves struggled against their masters; in medieval times the serfs battled against their noble oppressors; and in modern, industrial times the workers (the proletariat) wrestled against their masters, the capitalists. Inevitably, he wrote, the workers would triumph through revolution against their oppressors.

Marx held out to the end about the necessity of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, although later in life he was willing to concede that there might be an “American exception” to his concept. He was equivocal, too, about the claims of a few of his Russian followers that the Czarist regime might be overthrown and leap ahead into socialism (bypassing capitalism) since private property there was not well known by the masses.

Karl Marx spent most of his later years in Britain, where he fled after the failure of the 1848 revolutions. He spent his days there writing pieces for the press (including some in the United States), researching in the British Museum (where you can still see his desk to this day), and attending endless socialist meetings espousing his views. He was one of the driving forces behind the creation in 1864 of the International Workingmen's Association which in time evolved into the powerful Socialist International. His loyal wife, Jenny von Westphalen (1814-1881), stood by him through it all, even as four of his six children died, and in the end his historical views (if not his proposed tactics) prevailed in Europe's growing socialist movement.

As in Darwin's case, Marx was not the founder of socialist thought. The idea of social justice had been around for millennia. Theologians find it in the Old Testament and call the sentiment "distributive justice." The first Christian communities in Roman times eschewed private property for communal ownership of whatever wealth they possessed. But that's really not "socialism" and we don't find the word in use until it's coined by Count Henri de Saint Simon (1760-1825) in his L'Industrie (1817). It was soon adopted by such champions of the cause such as:

- Robert Owen (1771-1858) – a Welsh textile manufacturer who attempted to create ideal industrial communities in Britain (at his New Lanark plant) and in the United States at New Harmony, Indiana.
- Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), a member of the French parliament during the Second Republic, who in 1840 published the memorable work What is Property?, a question which he answered with the word "theft."

It is no coincidence that the concept of “socialism” arises in the first phase of the industrial revolution. Prior to that time, the notion of sharing the wealth had to do with agricultural wealth—land. For example, there were dissidents in Cromwell’s army, the “Levelers,” who argued for the common ownership of land throughout Great Britain. Cromwell had several of them hanged.

It was Saint Simon who identified industrial property as something different; social by its very nature since it was transforming society. He called for its collective ownership in a state that would be run by its masters, the industrial capitalists. What differentiates Marx from his socialist precursors (he called them disparagingly “utopians”) was that he linked the development to an inexorable historical process and also insisted that it would inevitably result in a proletarian revolution that would usher in a classless society which would be the final result of the evolution of human history. He even dedicated Das Kapital to Charles Darwin, although there’s no record of Darwin acknowledging the compliment.

While Victoria ruled both the industrial revolution and socialism spread across Europe; the former steadily eclipsing traditional agricultural society while the latter clamored for yet a new form of social organization. While Marxism during the latter half of the nineteenth century steadily became the language of the socialist movement, Marx found himself engaged in furious verbal duals with:

- Anarchists – mostly followers of Michael Bakunin (1814-1876), a Russian nobleman who preached immediate and violent revolution to bring down all forms of the social order, including religion, private property, and government itself. At Marx’s behest, Bakunin was expelled from the First International in 1872 but his followers persisted throughout the latter part of the century, spreading terror and actually assassinating royals and heads of state (such as our own President McKinley) right into the twentieth century.

- Revisionists – beginning with Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) who maintained that violent revolution (whether immediate or long-term) was unnecessary because of the relentless progress of democracy in the Western nations. These views, expressed in his Evolutionary Socialism (1898), would form the intellectual basis of the emerging Social Democratic Party in many places on the Continent and the Labour Party in Great Britain. The latter, not really a Marxist party, was created in 1899, even while Victoria still ruled.

When Marx died in 1883, these issues were still unsettled among the socialists but their numbers had become formidable. In fact, in 1904, Alexander Millerand (1859-1943), an avowed socialist, was assigned a ministerial post in the French cabinet, a first in Western history.

I've been speaking so far about the revolution in Western thought that occurred in Victoria's time, especially after the failed revolutions of 1848. First we looked at the Darwinian revolution; next the advent of revolutionary socialism. Now let's take a glance at the arts. The so-called "Age of Enlightenment" characterized the eighteenth century with its neo-classical themes. Some examples of its expressions are the following:

- The paintings of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) or Jacques Louis David (1748-1825).
- The architecture of the newly-created city of St. Petersburg.
- The poetry of Alexander Pope (1688-1744).
- The music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) – [the Jupiter].

Even before the century ended, however, there was an artistic rebellion against neo-classicism, soon to be styled "romanticism" that reached its fullest expression in the Victorian era. To demonstrate my point I would cite the following:

- The landscape paintings of John Constable (1776-1837)

- The sculpture of Britain's Houses of Parliament, which had been badly burned by a fire in 1834 and were redesigned by the architect Charles Barry (1795-1860) in the Gothic style, a clear expression of dissent from neo-classicism. That architectural style would dominate Victorian structures and decor.
- The poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) or Johann Schiller (1759-1805)
- The music of Ludwig von Beethoven (1770-1827) – [6<sup>th</sup> symphony].

In contrast to neo-classicism, the Romantic movement placed its emphasis upon sentiment (not reason), tradition (not revolution), and the uniqueness of Nature (rather than the cosmopolitan universalism of the Enlightenment period).

Still, by mid-century, there was something else stirring in the arts. I want to use the works of two painters to illustrate my meaning. First, there's William Turner (1775-1851) whose canvases, "The Fighting 'Téméraire'" and "The Snowstorm" demonstrate how artists such as he were coming to understand that mere representation of life as we see it does not comprehend other forces at work on our perceptions, such as light and emotion. The late work of the Spanish artist, Francisco Goya (1746-1828) also anticipated this intrusion of the irrational into art as he attempted to depict his first-hand experiences of the Napoleonic invasion of his homeland. His "black period" sketches are part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art and profoundly influenced the later work of the Spaniard Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), perhaps the most influential artist of the twentieth century.

The growing reaction in the late Victorian period against the sentimentality of romanticism is manifested in several ways, but for simplicity's sake let me boil it down to two:

- Realism – as in the literary works of Dickens (1812-1870) [Great Expectations and David Copperfield]; Victor Hugo (1802-1885) [Les Misérables 1862], and Fedor Dostoevski (1821-1881) [Notes from the Underground; The Brothers Karamazov].

- What I chose to call “Unrealism” – the intrusion of the irrational and the extra-sensory into Western culture even before the conclusion of Victoria’s reign. It is most clearly seen in the visual arts in the paintings of the French “impressionists” Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Eduard Manet (1832-1883). It had already found its way into philosophy with Schopenhauer’s The World of Will and Representation (1819) and in Charles Baudelaire’s (1821-1867) poetry, *Les Fleur du Mal* (1867).