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## THE TRÉMAUX LETTERS

**The form of this relationship between rulers and ruled naturally corresponds always with a definite stage in the development of the methods of labor and of its productive social power. This does not prevent the same economic basis from showing infinite variations and gradations in its appearances, even though its principal conditions are everywhere the same. This is due to innumerable outside circumstances, natural environment, race peculiarities, outside historical influences, and so forth, all of which must be ascertained by careful analysis. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3.<sup>1</sup>**

**On 7 August 1866, Karl Marx wrote a remarkable letter to Friedrich Engels in Manchester. He first begins with news about his daughter Laura:**

**Since yesterday Laura is half promised to Monsieur Lafargue, my medical Creole. She treats him like the others, but the outbursts of**

feeling these Creoles are subject to, a slight fear that the *jeune homme* (he is 25) might do away with himself, etc., some fondness for him, undemonstrative as always with Laura (he is a good-looking, intelligent, energetic lad of athletic build), have more or less led to a semi-compromise. The boy attached himself to me first of all, but soon transferred the attraction from the old man to his daughter. His economic circumstances are middling, as he is the only child of a former planter-family. He is *rayé de l'université de Paris Pour deux ans*, on account of the *congrès à Liège*, but intends to sit his examination at Strasbourg. In my judgment, he has an outstanding gift for medicine, in which he is, however, infinitely more skeptical than our friend Gumpert. Skepticism in medical matters appears to be the order of the day with both professors and students in Paris. E. g., Magendie, who declares all therapeutics, in their present state, to be fraudulent. As always, this skepticism not only does not exclude crotchets, but embraces them. E. g., Lafargue believes in alcohol and electricity as the chief cures. Fortunately, he is having a good adviser in Professor Carrère, a refugee (*hautes mathématiques*; physics and chemistry), and will be able to acquire much practical experience in the London hospitals. I have managed to get him admitted there through the good offices of a third party.

The Cuban-born mixed race “Creole” Paul Lafargue had an interesting family background. His grandfather, Jean Lafargue, had been a French planter living in San Domingo. There he had a child with a mulatto woman named Catalina Pirón. Their son, François Lafargue, most likely was born on San Domingo around the time of the Haitian Revolution. Jean disappeared and was most likely killed during the Revolution.

Paul Lafargue’s grandmother fled to Cuba and later either to New Orleans (or possibly New Caledonia) with François. François later wound up in Santiago de Cuba where he became a successful planter. However, in 1851 he relocated to Bordeaux and became a wine merchant there. His son Paul was born in Cuba in 1842. Paul’s mother Anna Virginia Armagnac was the daughter of Abraham Armagnac, a French Jew whose parents also had first

lived in Santo Domingo. His grandmother was a Caribe Indian woman named Margarita Fripié who never formally married Armagnac. As for Paul Lafargue, he was not shy about his racial heritage and liked to say that in his veins “ran the blood of three oppressed races.” When asked about his racial makeup by the American socialist leader Daniel DeLeon, Lafargue replied, “I am proudest of my negro extraction.”<sup>2</sup>

From his discussion of Lafargue, Marx then continues on a seemingly unrelated subject:

A very important work which I shall send on to you (but on condition that you send it back, as it is not my property) as soon as I have made the necessary notes, is: ‘P. Trémaux, *Origine et Transformations de l’Homme et des autres Êtres, Paris 1865*. In spite of all the shortcomings that I have noted, it represents a *very significant* advance over Darwin. The two chief theses are: *croisements* [crossings] do not produce, as is commonly thought, variety, but, on the contrary, a unity typical of the *espèces*. The physical features of the earth, on the other hand, *differentiate* (they are the chief, though not the only basis). Progress, which Darwin regards as purely accidental, is essential here on the basis of the stages of the earth’s development, *dégénérescence*, which Darwin cannot explain, is straightforward here; ditto the rapid extinction of merely transitional forms, compared with the slow development of the type of the *espece*, so that the gaps in paleontology, which Darwin finds disturbing, are necessary here. Ditto the fixity of the *espece*, once established, which is explained as a necessary law (apart from individual, etc., variations). Here hybridization, which raises problems for Darwin, on the contrary supports the system, as it is shown that an *espece* is in fact first established as soon as *croisement* with others ceases to produce offspring or to be possible, etc.

Marx’s comments are dense and so some background is in order. Although his letter to Engels devotes two paragraphs to Trémaux, I am going to start with some comments on just the first paragraph and then try to shed some light on

Trémaux before turning to examine Marx's concluding comments on a book he found a major achievement over Darwin.

First, Marx's comments, his remark that he has already noted some problems with Trémaux is somewhat puzzling since this letter seems to be the first real mention of the book. Nor do we know how Marx acquired the book "as it is not my property." But whose property was it and how did Marx come across it in the first place?

The reader should also not forget that Marx considered himself well informed on the debates concerning Darwin and the controversy surrounding *The Origin of Species*. Like radical secularists everywhere, he was thrilled at Darwin's debunking of Biblical creationist view. Between 1860 and 1864 he attended lectures on evolution by such leading lights as Thomas Huxley both at lectures Huxley gave for working class audiences as well as at London University where he also heard talks by the British physicist John Tyndall, one of Huxley's closest friends.<sup>3</sup>

In his remarks, Marx shows his belief in Darwin's idea that there is only one human species and thus he rejects the major counter theory to Darwin; namely that humans came not from one "tree" but from many – a theory known as "polygenesis." This is why Marx states that "crossings" – interbreeding – do not lead to "variety" or polygenesis – but to one unified species. The polygenetic faction had two basic points of view. One group rejected Darwin's approach totally and argued for something like spontaneous generation of new species. When it came to human beings, they believed that whites and blacks really were two different species because they argued that the creation of human beings took place in different parts of the world. There was no single "family tree" that began in Africa but many trees. The other view – led by Karl Vogt – accepted Darwin's idea that there was one species of mankind. Vogt, however, while a Darwinist in this sense fundamentally disagreed with Darwin's view that there could not be degeneration within the human species. In Trémaux, Marx saw a possible solution to what he clearly believed was true – namely that there were more advanced and more degenerate forms of mankind in a "materialist" manner

that relied on the physical features of the earth. Once one understood this, Darwin's notion of "random selection" producing "progress" – meaning in the language of the time "transformation" and what we would call evolution – could be far better explained since Marx was clearly unhappy with the idea of random change. At the same time, the physical geography of the earth could also demonstrate the process by which "degeneration" occurs as well. For this reason alone, Marx saw Trémaux as a major advance over Darwin.

## TRÉMAUX

Before continuing to look at the rest of Marx's comments on Trémaux, it is worth while putting Trémaux into some kind of historical context.

Unfortunately, Pierre Trémaux (1818-1893) remains a mystery. He first made his name with his travel publications as well as from the photographs he took on his journey. Trémaux spent the years 1847 to 1854 extensively traveling in Africa. Trémaux wrote a two volume book about his experiences in Africa entitled *Voyage en Ethiopie, au Soudan et dans la Nigrite* that appeared in Paris in 1863. He followed it up with *Origine et Transformations*, first published in 1865 by Hachette.

Trémaux's relative obscurity comes from the fact that his book has been continually dismissed as the writings of a semi-lunatic. In fact the only reason his name seems to occur in print is as a result of the fact that Marx wrote about him in such a remarkable way. The only Marx biographer that I have come across who actually read *Origine* is Nathaniel Weyl, the author of *Karl Marx: Racist*, a book published in 1979 by the rightwing publisher Arlington House. He characterizes Trémaux as "a French ethnologist and racist crackpot . . . which anyone well versed in science and scientific method would have dismissed as rubbish."<sup>4</sup>

Weyl's views embody the consensus view of Trémaux. After finally tracking down Trémaux's book, the famed leftwing scientist and evolution expert Stephen Jay Gould remarked:

I must say I have never read a more absurd or more poorly documented thesis. Basically, Trémaux argues that the nature of the soil determines

national characteristics and that higher civilizations tend to arise on more complex soils formed in later geological periods. If Marx really believed that such unsupported nonsense could exceed the *Origin of Species* in importance, then he could not have properly understood or appreciated the power of Darwin's facts and ideas.<sup>5</sup>

Traveler, naturalist, ethnologist or just plain old crackpot, the fact that a well-known publishing house like Hachette was willing to issue Trémaux's book suggests either that they took it seriously enough to be published or that Trémaux had established enough of a name for himself with his earlier work that they thought his new book might be profitable. In 1874 Trémaux recalled that his book first met with some brief success. He stated that after *Origine* first appeared:

Many other confirmations followed: 70 or 80 journals and reviews took note of my communication to the Academy [the *Académie des Sciences*]. Academic reception, a double decoration, etc., nothing lacked: I had demonstrated that our first ancestor had given rise to the whites and to the blacks. My first edition in duodecimo of 490 pages sold out in two months by the Librairie Hachette. But this was only one face of the question.

. . . Afterwards that Academy, the philosophy perceived that organisms, adopted to the soil on which they lived, that if, from the first ages of the earth, they have been modified, perfected in consequence of the amelioration of the soil, that is that they transform! Then unthinking tradition fell upon me, everything changed, I was guilty in spite of myself, it proved impossible to achieve a second edition that I wanted to revise. I gave up. It was then that I wanted to know where this terrible science was to lead.<sup>6</sup>

But what exactly did *Origine* argue? To reconstruct some of the text to provide an overall view of the book, I will draw on the extensive summary of the contents of this now utterly obscure work by both Nathaniel Weyl and Diane Paul. In reading this summary it should also be kept in mind that when

one reads the word “soil” (*sol*) it can arguably be alternatively translated as “habitat” just as beings (*etres*) can be read as “organisms.”

Trémaux begins his book in capital letters this way according to Weyl’s translation: “THE GREAT LAW OF THE PERFECTION OF BEINGS” is that “THE PERFECTION OF BEINGS IS OR SHOULD BE PROPORTIONATE TO THE DEGREE THAT THE SOIL ON WHICH THEY LIVE IS WORKED! *And, in general, the soil is more heavily worked to the extent that it belongs to a more recent geological formation.*”<sup>7</sup>

Diane Paul describes Trémaux’s views this way:

Trémaux’s theory relates the nature of the soil to human racial types (a not uncommon kind of argument in the nineteenth century although Trémaux’s version is particularly crude). The nature of the soil, according to Trémaux, changes over time. Older – primary or secondary – rocks are less “perfect” than are rocks of more recent periods. It follows that persons who live on more recent terrain are themselves more perfect (except where recent soil is the product of the erosion of old rocks). Perfection in humans is defined largely in aesthetic terms; e.g., Negroes are ugly, not because of their color (which to Trémaux is an unimportant feature of race) but because of their shape, while white Caucasians, especially Greeks, are beautiful.<sup>8</sup>

According to Trémaux’s “Great Law, then, beauty, health, intelligence, energy, and civilization levels of various peoples “correspond directly to the geological age of the land they occupy. Crude, brutish, stupid and lazy peoples and races lived on geologically old terrain” while “refined, civilized, handsome, healthy, bright and energetic peoples occupied geologically new land.”<sup>9</sup> To make his point, Trémaux took his readers on an imaginary world tour. Stopping off in the Subcontinent, he wrote: “In India, where the soil permits, one finds fairly handsome people, but in its peninsula, where there are large expanses of primitive soil . . . one sees people with black skin as hideous as monkeys.”<sup>10</sup> As for Scandinavia, it occupied “the greatest area of geologically primitive terrain in Europe.” Hence “the Lapps are therefore the most inferior of people.” As for the Swedes, Norwegians and Finns, they

hadn't lived in the area long enough to degenerate to the level of the Lapps but given enough time that is exactly what would happen.<sup>11</sup>

In Trémaux's view, the most favorable soils were "all of the west and south of Europe and more especially France, Italy, Greece, part of Germany, southeast England, and eastern Spain. It is there that civilization and the intellectual faculties rule." One area where the not so intelligent ruled, however, was Ireland. Trémaux argued that following the wars of 1641 and 1689, the English drove "the native Irish into the barony of Flews, on a granite and very poor carboniferous soil." While the English preserved their native character by occupying the newer habitat, the native Irish "except for their color . . . would be taken for a backward population of Australian aborigines."<sup>12</sup>

Trémaux was never very clear about just what made the new terrain better. Moreover, Diane Paul reports:

Trémaux suggests no mechanism by which the perfection of the soil could be translated into improved human types. His entire argument is, in fact, based on correlations: people with similar characteristics tend to live on the same kind of soil. For example, Newfoundlanders (who live on "old rocks") are "a sort of Negro," American Negroes, however, are much closer to American whites than to Australian aborigines. There are, therefore, as many different human races as there are soils of different type. Even within France, claims Trémaux, the people of Brittany, who live on old soil, are religious, superstitious, traditional in their allegiances, and willing to place their government in the hands of a king, while the people of Paris, who live on recently developed terrain, are intelligent, industrious, independent, and favor representative government.

Trémaux admitted that the impact of the soil on racial distinctions can be especially complex since there may be interbreeding just at the time when differences begin to manifest themselves or as he put it, "the soil diversifies, fecundity unites." Other factors such as the kind of diet the population follows will also play a role. Slavery may also work at cross-purposes to the natural impact of the soil.

Speaking of slavery, Trémaux stressed the geological role in the fight between the North and South. People who lived on new soil – namely the Southerners – didn't want to be ruled by people who lived on old soil. As Trémaux wrote in *Origines*:

What is the secret of this [Southern] resistance? Ask geology. She will show you that the South has a magnificent zone of soils, quaternary and tertiary. [Trémaux means soils formed during the early and later part of the Cenozoic Era.] On the contrary, primitive Silurian and coal-bearing soils predominate in the North. Here, therefore, the same principals as elsewhere, the inhabitants of geologically recent soils do not wish to be governed by those of ancient soils.<sup>13</sup>

Of course since Trémaux wrote in 1865 when it was clear the North was going to win the war, he conceded the fact but went on to comment: “we dare to predict that in the future it will be the South which will govern the North, assuming the two countries do not remain separate.”<sup>14</sup>

When it came to Eastern Europe, Trémaux had equally strong views. Because Russia occupied “old soil” it produced mediocre humans. Anyone who conquered Russia would over time suffer the same kind of degeneration.

Trémaux summed up his argument this way: “Mix and exchange yourselves, oh peoples! And there will always be, if the environment does not change, English people on the Thames, French people in France, Romans on the Tiber, Egyptians in Egypt, Negroes in Sudan and Redskins in America.”<sup>15</sup> In their defense of Trémaux as someone who should be taken more seriously, two Australian academics named John Wilkins and Gareth Nelson claim that Trémaux was “an extreme adoptionist” so that for him there was “no distinction between a locally adapted population and a race.” Therefore they try to argue that the idea that Trémaux believed that Negroes are some kind of “degeneration” was false because Trémaux believed that “*all* races are locally adapted populations to the conditions in which they find themselves.”<sup>16</sup> They both agree that Trémaux also “allows that a new species may form by ‘degeneration’ in unfavorable conditions, but that it is likely to become extinct.”<sup>17</sup>

**Trémaux's racism, then was of a highly peculiar nature and highly fluid. Although he considered the Negroes he encountered a degeneration of a higher race of men that the higher race had dark skin was not a problem for him. As Diane Paul puts it:**

**Degenerate races, therefore, are those that migrated to geologically inferior terrain. The Egyptians who moved South, to the Sudan, for example, have characteristics less perfect than those in the North. The degeneration of Mayan civilization is explained as the result of migration to a soil less perfect than the people. Trémaux is clearly a monogenist: he explains human racial differences not in terms of multiple origins but in terms of degeneration from a common type. For example, he insists that the Negro is not a perfected ape but a degenerated human being. Moreover, we are not entirely helpless in the face of geological-cum-racial differences. Besides the possibility of migration, man can have some influences over the quality of the soil through reforestation of lands and the use of fertilizers.<sup>18</sup>**

**As a “monogenist” Trémaux was very much part of the Darwinian view in stark rejection of the radical positivist faction in French academic circles associated most with the famous scientist Paul Broca, the leading promoter of scientific polygenism. Broca was so committed to polygenism that he helped create the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* in 1859 to promote his views.<sup>19</sup> The Society also attracted a group of radical materialists who in contrast to Broca and his positivist friends supported Darwin's ideas but who also held to an interpretation of Darwinism that against Darwin's own views advanced the concept of “polygenist evolutionism.” The core of such views involved the concept that races could both “evolve” but also “decay.” (Perhaps for this reason, Trémaux said he discovered that Neanderthal skulls were “strongly reminiscent of the crania of monkeys.”<sup>20</sup>) Broca later described his good friend and scientific opponent Vogt as one of the “neopolygenist transformationists.”<sup>21</sup> In 1866, the same year Marx discovered Trémaux, the alliance between the positivists and the scientific materialists led by Vogt became even stronger through the first International Congress of**

**Anthropology and Prehistoric Archeology which Vogt and his French disciple Gabriel de Mortillet organized at Neuchâtel and a year later in Paris.<sup>22</sup>**

**If I am reading Marx correctly, the real reason he embraced Trémaux was not because Marx was a simple Darwinist; he actually followed Vogt in the idea of “neopolygenist transformationalism” meaning that he too accepted the notion of “degeneration,” the cornerstone of Vogt’s objection to Darwin. With Trémaux, I suspect Marx believed he saw the scientific outline of a “Marxist” answer to both Darwin and Vogt in that Trémaux had solved the mystery of “degeneration” through an explanation that focused on “materialist” explanations centered on the nature of the environment and not simply biological ones. In fact with his notion of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) and particularly in his attempt to emphasize “geological” considerations behind the rise of AMP cultures such as the role of rivers and the subsequent rise of state-sponsored irrigation systems, Marx and Engels in a way one could say had oddly anticipated Trémaux.**

## **DUCHINSKI AND TRÉMAUX**

**Because Marx’s letter to Engels about Trémaux is so important and because the background surrounding it is still veiled in mystery, it has been necessary to provide some extensive background information on Trémaux and his ideas before we can proceed to the second and final critical paragraph of the discussion of Trémaux in Marx’s 7 August 1866 letter which in some ways is even more extraordinary than the first.**

**Marx tells Engels about Trémaux’s *Origine*:**

**In its historical and political applications far more significant and pregnant than Darwin. For certain questions, such as nationality, etc., only here has a basis in nature been found. E.g., he corrects the Pole Duchinski, whose version of the geological differences between Russia and the Western Slav lands he does incidentally confirm, by saying not that the Russians are Tartars rather than Slavs, etc., as the latter believes, but that on the surface-formation predominant in Russia the Slav has been tartarised and mongolised; likewise (he spent a long time**

in Africa) he shows that the common negro type is only a degeneration of a far higher one.

**‘If not comprehended by the great laws of nature, man’s undertakings are but calamities, witness the efforts of the Czars to make Muscovites of the Polish people. [...] The same soil will give rise to the same character and the same qualities. A work of destruction cannot last forever, but a work of reconstitution is everlasting. The true frontier of the Slav and Lithuanian races with the Muscovites is represented by the great geological line which lies to the north of the basins of the Niemen and the Dnieper... To the south of that great line, the talents and the types fitted to that region are and will always remain different from those of Russia.’ [P. Trémaux, *Origine et transformations de l’homme...* pp. 402, 420, 421.]**

As it so happens, Weyl also translated a fuller version of Trémaux’s statement about the Poles and Russians from pages 420-21 of *Origines* which provides a further elaboration of Trémaux’s argument:

**poor Poland, which suffers most bitterly, as its geological frontiers with Muscovy are even more vigorously invaded. The Slavic and Lithuanian races have their true frontier with the Muscovites in the great geological line that stretched north of the Niemen and Dnieper basins. In effect, the Slavs who crossed that border have been largely changed – brutalized, say the other Slavs, who attribute this effect to the power of this or that prince. . . . But it is not all the same south of this great geological line: the aptitudes and the types appropriate to this region will always remain entirely different from those of Russia. When they are in conflict with the great laws of nature, the projects of man are mere calamities, as witness the efforts of the Czars to transform the Polish people into Muscovites.<sup>23</sup>**

As for Marx’s reference to “Duchinski,” this was undoubtedly Henri-François Duchinski (Franciszek Henryk Duchinski).<sup>24</sup> To understand just why Marx

brings up his name it is necessary to cite an earlier letter Marx had written Engels on 24 June 1865:

*Ad vocem Poland*, I was most interested to read the work by *Elias Regnault* (the same who wrote the ‘histoire des principautés danubiennes’), ‘La Question Européenne, faussement nommée La Question Polonaise’. I see from it that Lapinski’s dogma that the Great Russians are *not Slavs* has been advocated on linguistic, historical and ethnographical grounds in all seriousness by Monsieur *Duchinski* (from Kiev, Professor in Paris); he maintains that the real Muscovites, i.e., inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy of Moscow, were for the most part Mongols or Finns, etc., as was the case in the parts of Russia situated further east and in its south-eastern parts. I see from it at all events that the affair has seriously worried the St Petersburg cabinet (since it would put an end to *Panslavism* in no uncertain manner). All Russian scholars were called on to give responses and refutations, and these in the event turned out to be terribly weak. The purity of the Great Russian dialect and its connection with Church Slavonic appear to lend more support to the Polish than to the Muscovite view in this debate. During the last Polish insurrection Duchinski was awarded a prize by the National Government for his ‘discoveries’. It has ditto been shown geologically and hydrographically that a great ‘Asiatic’ difference occurs east of the Dnieper, compared with what lies to the west of it, and that (as Murchison has already maintained) the *Urals* by no means constitute a dividing line. Result as obtained by Duchinski: Russia is a name usurped by the Muscovites. They are not Slavs; they do not belong to the Indo-Germanic race at all, they are *des intrus* [intruders], who must be chased back across the Dnieper, etc. Panslavism in the Russian sense is a cabinet invention, etc.

I wish that Duchinski were right and at all events that this view would prevail among the Slavs. On the other hand, he states that some of the peoples in Turkey, such as Bulgars, e.g., who had previously been regarded as Slavs, are non-Slav.

As it so happens, Duchinski's views were driven by strong racial archetypes and in order to understand what Marx is referencing, we must spend a little time on Duchinski, yet another 19<sup>th</sup> century figure now long relegated to the historical dustbin.

Born in 1816, Duchinski was of Ukrainian background. However he was a "Right-Bank Ukrainian" meaning that he came from an area that was historically far closer to Poland than Muscovy. When he was just a youth the 1831 Polish Uprising enormously affected him, and he spent the rest of his life trying to create a quasi-independent Ukrainian state linked to Poland and independent of Russia. He always referred to the Ukraine as "Rus" and argued that the so-called Russians were actually not real Slavs.

After he began arguing that the Russians were not really Slavs, Duchinski apparently was expelled from Russia. According to one source, he wound up in Paris in 1846 and became part of the entourage of the Polish state in exile led by Prince Czartoryski. His 1 August 1893 *New York Times* obituary, however, states that he reportedly first left Russia in 1848 and first went to Turkey and then Italy where he became involved in the anti-Austrian uprising in Piedmont which was led by a Polish general. After the rebellion was crushed, he returned to Turkey as a member of the Hungarian legation in Constantinople where he stayed from 1849 to 1855. While there, he tried to get the Ottomans to endorse the creation of a Cossack Legion that he hoped would recapture the Ukraine using the military and political resources of the Ottoman Empire. During the Crimean War, he served as a civilian advisor to the British. Duchinski also was said to have penned a two volume work advocating for the Crimean War by stressing the war represented both a fight for the Ottoman Empire and for civilization. He then returned to Paris in 1856.

Back in Paris, Duchinski began producing a series of works that presented the Polish-Russian conflict in starkly racial terms. Duchinski's attempt at a racial philosophy of history was posed most starkly in his 1864 book *Peuples Aryâs et Tourans*, published in Paris by the Klincksieck publishing house and most likely the text Marx was referencing in his letter to Engels.

According to Duchinski, there were two basic races or branches of mankind, the Aryans or Indo-Europeans on the one hand and the “Turanians” on the other. The concept of “Turanian” languages and peoples (what we would today call Ural-Altai) first arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century first as a way of classifying people with white skins like Hungarians, Finns or Turks whose linguistic background was neither Indo-European nor Semitic.<sup>25</sup> (The word itself was derived from the Persian word “Turan” meaning Turkistan.) It was later expanded to include other agglutinate languages including Tibetan.

In Duchinski’s argument, the “Turanians” included the Finno-Ugric, Turks, Mongols, Chinese, Negroes, Australian Aborigines, etc. Against them stood the Aryans who included the Poles as well as the true representatives of “Rus,” namely, the Ukrainians. Duchinski distinguished the two groups by their cultures. The Aryans were productive agriculturalists while the Turanians embraced nomadic forms of life. Duchinski believed the Russian government didn’t descend from Rurik and the original Varangian invaders of Russia and whose descendants founded Kiev. Instead the current government was the product of the Mongol invasions whose real origin only dated back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The Poles were therefore bitterly opposed to the “Turanian” rulers of Moscow whose true roots were in the nomadic world of the Mongols and Chinese. According to Duchinski, Aryan culture actually extended to the Dnieper Valley. Since real Slavs were real Aryans, the Poles and Ukrainians and Poles shared an Aryan heritage. Marx reports that Duchinski’s work won a “prize” from the Polish National Government during the “last Polish insurrection” which would have been in 1863. Duchinski also attracted a leading group of French Russophobes, the most important of whom was Henri Martin, a leading historian and republican politician who in 1866 also published a book entitled *Le Russie et l’Europe* dealing with the question of Poland.<sup>26</sup> Other supporters of Duchinski included Elias Regnault, a historian known for his work on the history of Romania as well as the author of the 1863 book *La question européenne improprement appelée polonaise* mentioned by Marx. In that book, he attacks Russian critics of the “Turanian” argument such as the well-known Russian historian Mikhail Pogodin who was appalled by these arguments. Even Dostoevsky felt compelled to attack “Turanians” like Henri

**Martin, who made no secret of his support for the “Turanian” Ottomans against Russia during the Crimean War and who described Russia as barbaric.<sup>27</sup>**

**Marx was intrigued by Duchinski’s arguments. With Trémaux’s work, he now seems to have felt that he not only had “a significant advance” over Darwin but that he had also found the “materialist” underpinnings to justify his own desire to unite Europeans in a broader war against Moscow. Duchinski’s allies included the French explorer Auguste Viquesnel in his 1868 book *Journal d’un voyage dans la Turquie d’Europe* also stressed “geographic” differences that made Russia separate from the West including its rivers, climate, and steppes, an argument similar to aspects of Marx’s AMP theory.<sup>28</sup>**

#### **KARL MARX: PHRENOLOGIST ?**

**Marx’s interest in Trémaux’s highly unorthodox views may stem in part from the fact that Marx was willing to entertain what today would be considered unorthodox views on other scientific issues as well. There is even evidence to suggest that Marx took phrenology seriously in spite of the fact that Hegel satirized phrenology mercilessly in *The Phenomenology of Mind*.**

**This may be true even though Marx savagely ridiculed the German radical leader Gustav Struve in *Heroes of the Exile*. Marx introduces him this way: “Gustav Struve is one of the more important figures of the emigration. At the very first glimpse of his leathery appearance, his protuberant eyes with their sly, stupid expression, the mat gleam on his bald pate and his half Slav, half Kalmuck features, one cannot doubt that one is in the presence of an unusual man.” This unusual man had unusual ideas: “Regarding his own skull as the normal human cranium, he vigorously applied himself to phrenology and from then on he refused to trust anyone whose skull he had not yet felt and examined. He also gave up eating meat and preached the gospel of strict vegetarianism. . . . Given his thoroughgoing hatred of concrete knowledge it was natural that he should be in favor of free universities in which the four faculties would be replaced by the study of phrenology, physiognomy, chiromancy and necromancy.”<sup>29</sup>**

What is most curious about Marx's comments is the fact that according to Wilhelm Liebknecht, who knew Marx very well when they lived in exile in London, Marx indulged in the very phrenological activity he mocked Struve for conducting. From Liebknecht's memoirs of his time in London:

Marx endeavored to make sure of his men and to secure them for himself. He was not such a zealous devotee of phrenology as Gustav Struve, but he believed in it to some extent, and when I first met him – I have already mentioned it – he not only examined me with questions, but also with his fingers, making them dance over my skull in a connoisseur's style. Later on he arranged for a regular investigation by the phrenologist of the party, the good old painter, Karl Pfänder, one of the "oldest," who helped to found the Communist Alliance, and who was present in that memorial council to whom the *Communist Manifesto* was submitted, and by whom it was discussed and accepted in due form.<sup>30</sup>

Pfänder, a miniature painter by profession, had lived as an émigré in London since 1845. He had been a leading member of the League of the Just and was present at the famous League of the Just last convention in late 1847 when the League changed names to the Communist League and also adopted the proposal to have Marx and Engels write the *Communist Manifesto* as a statement of the new CL's principles. Liebknecht says he had his skull "officially inspected" by Pfänder who found nothing "that would have prevented my admission into the Holiest of Holies of the Communist Alliance."<sup>31</sup> Pfänder might also have been the friend Marx referenced in a 11 January 1868 letter to Dr. Ludwig Kugelmann when he commented: "One of my friends here, who dabbles a lot in phrenology, said yesterday when looking at the photograph of your wife: A great deal of wit! So you see, phrenology is not the baseless art which Hegel imagined."<sup>32</sup>

Although phrenology was regularly satirized by its critics, for a few decades it proved enormously influential. Phrenology was adopted by free-thinkers to promote a materialist view of the world as well as by "scientific racists." In England phrenology attracted the interest of some leading members of the middle class like George Eliot, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer and

Richard Cobden who founded the Manchester Phrenological Society.<sup>33</sup> Yet the strongest appeal of phrenology seems to have been within the upwardly mobile working classes. In the 1840s virtually every Mechanics' Institute – lecture halls created for the education of workers and also patronized by Philosophical Radicals – had a phrenological bust on display. Phrenology was also presented by free-thinkers as an atheistic and naturalistic doctrine that they used to strike down religious-inspired arguments about the human soul. Through the allure of phrenology, materialist thinking became popular. Meanwhile phrenology helped prepare the way for the acceptance of the new science of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Darwinism as phrenological charts with their comparisons of the skulls of monkeys and men crudely prefigured Darwinian ideas.<sup>34</sup>

Yet phrenology served as the shadow sister to the scientific connection to “craniology” which in the 1840s and 1850s became intimately linked with scientific racism. One of the world's leading craniologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the Philadelphia-based Dr. Samuel George Morton, who became world famous for his collection of skulls from different racial groups. Although not a phrenologist himself, Morton was close enough to phrenology that the leading phrenologist of the 1830s, the Scotsman George Combe, not only visited Morton and his collection but he contributed an essay to Morton's 1839 book *Crania Americana*. In his essay, Combe “emphasized that the size of the brain was indicated by the dimensions of the skull, and that nationalities as well as individuals could be differentiated by the size of their brains. He was particularly scathing in his discussion of the American Indians” whom Combe believed were even more primitive than blacks.<sup>35</sup> One of Morton's pupils, Josiah Nott, in 1854 co-wrote the book *Types of Mankind* with George Robins Gliddon, the U.S. vice counsel at Cairo and an amateur Egyptologist. Gliddon also worked closely with Morton and had supplied him with skulls for Morton's 1844 opus *Crania Aegyptiaca*. *Types of Mankind* was both their memorial volume to Morton who died in 1851 as well as one of the highpoints of American polygenetic theorizing.<sup>36</sup> The debates over polygenesis and the origin of man – along with related craniological theorizing – also crossed over into Europe where it found a leading advocate in Paul Broca who as we have

seen in 1859 helped found his own Anthropology Society in Paris to advance his controversial views.

As for Marx, his weird comments about Lassalle in his notorious 30 July 1862 letter to Engels: “It is now completely clear to me that he, as proved by his cranial formation and [curly] hair – descends from the Negroes who had joined Moses’ exodus from Egypt (assuming his mother or grandmother on the paternal side had not interbred with a Nigger” also suggests his interest in craniology/phrenology and issues of “interbreeding.” Marx’s openness to Trémaux’s ideas, then, may in part be based on his earlier interest in phrenology/craniology which he may also have believed had some kind of “materialist” kernel of truth as well.

## ENGELS OBJECTS

Marx’s citation of Trémaux’s *The Origin and Transformation of Man and Other Beings* coupled with his astonishing remark that it represented a significant advance over Darwin including its “historical and political applications” naturally interested Engels. Engels comments on Trémaux in two letters to Marx Engels’ reply has been traditionally interpreted as Engels setting Marx straight about Darwin. From John Bellamy Foster’s book *Marx’s Ecology*: “Yet Engels, who was sharply critical of Trémaux for his poor knowledge of geology and his absurd ideas about race, seems to have convinced Marx in this respect since all mention of Trémaux ceases after October 1866.”<sup>37</sup> Or take Stephen Jay Gould’s comments: “The more sober Engels bought the book at Marx’s urging, but then dampened his friend’s ardor by writing: “I have arrived at the conclusion that there is nothing to his theory if for no other reason than because he neither understands geology nor is capable of the most ordinary literary historical criticism.”<sup>38</sup> For generations of Marxists, the idea that the “sober Engels” steered his friend back to the Darwinian straight and narrow path; the idea that Engels’ own views might be shaped by his own racism never is mentioned. Yet clearly Engels believes in racial categories of superiority and inferiority.

In his first 2 October 1866 letter on Trémaux, Engels commented:

Regarding . . . Trémaux I will write at greater length in the next few days; I have not quite finished reading the latter yet, but I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing to his whole theory because he knows nothing of geology, and is incapable of even the most common-or-garden literary-historical critique. That stuff about the nigger Santa Maria and the whites turning into Negroes is enough to make one die of laughing. Especially the idea that the traditions of the Senegal niggers necessarily deserve credence, *just because these fellows cannot write!* In addition, it is another pretty notion of his to ascribe the differences between a Basque, a Frenchman, a Breton, and an Alsatian to the surface-structure, which is, of course, also to blame for the people speaking four different languages.

Perhaps the man will demonstrate in the 2nd volume how he explains that we Rhinelanders on our Devonian transitional massif (which has not been covered again by the sea since long before the coal was formed) did not become idiots and niggers ages ago, or else he will assert that we are really niggers.

The book is utterly worthless, pure theorizing in defiance of all the facts, and for each piece of evidence it cites it should itself first provide evidence in turn.

In a 3 October 1866 letter, Marx countered:

*Ad vocem Trémaux:* your verdict ‘that there is nothing to his whole theory because *he* knows nothing of geology, and is incapable of even the most common-or-garden literary-historical critique recurs *almost word for word* in Cuvier’s ‘Discours sur les Révolutions du Globe’ in his attack on the doctrine of the *variabilité des especes*, in which he makes fun of German nature-worshippers, among others, who *formulated* Darwin’s basic idea in its entirety, however far they were from being able to *prove* it. However, that did not prevent Cuvier, who was a great geologist and for a naturalist also an exceptional literary-historical critic, from being wrong, and the people who formulated the new idea, from being right. Trémaux’s basic idea about the *influence of the soil*

(although he does not, of course, attach any value to historical modifications of this influence, and I myself would include amongst these historical modifications the chemical alteration in the surface soil brought about by agriculture, etc., as well as the varying influence which, with varying modes of production, such things as coalfields, etc., have) is, in my opinion, an idea which needs only to be *formulated* to acquire permanent scientific status, and that quite independently of the way Trémaux presents it.

On 5 October 1866, Engels volleyed back:

*Ad vocem* Trémaux. When I wrote to you, I had admittedly only read a third of the book, and that was certainly the worst part (at the beginning). The second third, the critique of the schools, is far better; the third, the conclusions, very bad again. The man deserves credit for having emphasized the effect of the ‘soil’ on the evolution of races and logically of species as well more than had previously been done, and secondly for having worked out more accurate (though, in my view, still very one-sided) views on the effects of crossing than his predecessors. In *one* respect, Darwin is also right in his views on the effect crossing has *in producing change*, as Trémaux incidentally tacitly acknowledges, in that, when it suits him to do so, he also treats crossing as a means of change, even if ultimately as one that cancels itself out. Similarly, Darwin and others have never failed to appreciate the effect of the soil, and if they did not especially emphasize it, this was because they had no notion of *how* the soil exerts an influence — other than that fertility has a favorable and infertility an unfavorable effect. And Trémaux is little the wiser about that either. The hypothesis that, as a general rule, the soil favors the development of higher species to the extent that it belongs to more recent formations, sounds exceedingly plausible and may or may not be correct; however, when I see the ridiculous evidence with which Trémaux seeks to substantiate it, of which 9/10 is based on erroneous or distorted facts and the remaining 1/10 proves nothing, I cannot but extend the profound suspicions I have of the author of the hypothesis to the hypothesis itself. But when he then goes on to declare

that the effect of the soil's greater or lesser age, modified by crossing, is the *sole* cause of change in organic species or races, I see absolutely no reason to go along with the man thus far, on the contrary, I see numerous objections to so doing.

You say that Cuvier also criticized the German natural philosophers for their ignorance of geology when they proclaimed the mutability of species, and yet they were proved right. At that time, however, the question had nothing to do with geology; but if someone puts forward a theory of the mutability of species based on *geology alone* and makes such geological howlers in it, *falsifies* the geology of whole countries (e.g., Italy and even France) and takes the rest of his examples from countries of whose geology we are as good as totally ignorant (Africa, Central Asia, etc.), then that is altogether a different matter. With regard to the ethnological examples in particular, the ones that concern countries and peoples which are generally known are almost without exception erroneous, either in their geological premises or in the conclusions drawn from them — and he completely ignores the many contrary examples, e.g., the alluvial plains in Central Siberia, the enormous alluvial basin of the River Amazon, all the alluvial land southward from La Plata almost to the southern tip of America (east of the Cordilleras).

That the geological structure of the soil is closely related to the 'soil' in which everything grows is an old idea, likewise that this soil which is able to support vegetation influences the flora and fauna that subsist on it. It is also true that this influence has as yet been scarcely examined at all. But it is a colossal leap from there to Trémaux's theory. At all events, he deserves credit for having emphasized this previously neglected aspect, and, as I said, the hypothesis that the soil *encourages* evolution in proportion to its greater or lesser geological age, may be correct *within certain limits* (or again it may not), but all the further conclusions he draws I consider to be either totally mistaken or incredibly one-sided and exaggerated.

Unconvinced, Marx wrote in 9 October 1866 letter to his friend Dr. Ludwig Kugelmann:

I would also recommend to you *Trémaux: 'De l'origine de tous les êtres, etc.'* Although written in a slovenly way, full of geological howlers and seriously deficient in literary-historical criticism, it represents — with all that, and all that — an advance over Darwin.

## ENGELS ON RACE

Engels' more “sober” reading of Trémaux, I suspect, was not uncommon. Yet it was also clearly based in part on Engels' disbelief in the fluidity of Trémaux's racial speculations. Yet Engels -- like Marx a monogenesis supporter – also believed in the idea of degeneration of races. In his 1876 essay, *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, Engels observes about the development of the human hand:

It is in this that one sees the great gulf between the undeveloped hand of even the most man-like apes and the human hand that has been highly perfected by hundreds of thousands of years of labor. The number and general arrangement of the bones and muscles are the same in both hands, but the hand of the lowest savage can perform hundreds of operations that no simian hand can imitate – no simian hand has ever fashioned even the crudest stone knife.

The first operation for which our ancestors gradually learned to adapt their hands during the many thousands of years of transition from ape to man could have been only very simple ones. The lowest savages, even those in whom regression to a more animal-like condition with a simultaneous physical degeneration can be assumed, are nevertheless far superior to these transitional beings.<sup>39</sup>

The simple fact was that both Marx and Engels to a significant extent accepted the “advanced” scientific thinking on racial differences even though

the overwhelming focus of their political and research endeavors remained rooted in the organization and transformation of society. But racism was so much in the air that Engels could joke in a 26 April 1887 letter to Laura Marx, Karl's daughter and the wife of Paul Lafargue, about the fact that Lafargue was running for the Paris Municipal Council in a district that contained the Jardin des Plantes and the Paris Zoo about Paul being "the candidate of the Jardin des Plantes – and the animals." Therefore, "Being in his quality as a nigger a degree nearer to the rest of the animal kingdom than the rest of us, he is undoubtedly the most appropriate representative of that district." In his biography of Lafargue, Leslie Derfler states:

Although, of course, aware of Lafargue's racial origins, the Marxes showed no signs of real prejudice. They did share certain beliefs common to the bourgeois and others of their era, about national traits (for example, of the French) and the supposedly emotional temperament of those from warmer climates. But their references to Lafargue's one-eighth black background were couched in affectionate and joking terms and seen as a source of amusement, not concern. To family and friends, Marx referred to Lafargue as the "gorilla," the "negrillo," and the "nigger." Later, after the now-married Lafargues had returned to France, Marx asked his youngest daughter to extend his compliments to the "African."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Paul, "'In the Interests of Civilization': Marxist Views of Race and Culture in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42/1 (January-March 1981), 119.

<sup>2</sup> On Lafargue's background, see Leslie Derfler, *Paul Lafargue and the Founding of French Marxism: 1842-1882* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 13-17.

<sup>3</sup> John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). 198.

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<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Weyl, *Karl Marx: Racist* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1979), 72. For a summary of Trémaux's work I will draw on both Weyl and Diane Paul. Although Paul never read *Origine*, she writes: "I am greatly indebted to Camille Limoges of the University of Montreal for his patient explanation of the *Origins and Transformation* . . . to someone baffled both by Trémaux's French and by his science. Oddly enough, none of the many scholars who have discussed Marx's view of Trémaux's work in the context of Trémaux's general attitude towards Darwinism have read *the Origins and Transformation*." Paul, 121.

Based on Paul's notes alone, very few scholars have even bothered with Trémaux at all and the few who do mention him in the context of Marx almost immediately dismiss this incident. Paul, in contrast, is one of the first academics to actually do some investigative research on the connection. As a result, her article is a scholarly milestone. That said, the article devotes eight pages (entitled "What Marx and Engels Said about Blacks") on Trémaux and related writers.

Yet there are authors who believe that Trémaux has been badly misunderstood. For this view as well as for a translation of Chapter VIII of Trémaux's *Origin*, see John Wilkins and Gareth Nelson, "Trémaux on species: A theory of allopatric speciation (and punctuated equilibrium) before Wagner," a 2008 paper by two Australian academics. Their article first appeared in the journal *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 30 (2008), pp. 179-206. It is now available on the Internet and when I give page numbers for the article I am citing from the pdf version on the Internet. The authors argue that Trémaux's views have been drastically mischaracterized and they suggest Trémaux may have even influenced a comments Darwin made in the 1866 fourth edition of *The Origin of Species*. They state that Trémaux has been mistranslated and that when he used the word "sol" he did not mean simply "soil" but rather "habitat." Thus they believe it is wrong to see him as a total crackpot. Instead they view him as a precursor to the ideas of allopatric speciation (allopatric meaning something originating in or occupying a different geographical area) and thus a precursor to the ideas of the German naturalist and explorer Moritz Wagner. Wagner argued that speciation was due to local adoption and not directly to natural selection.

As for why Marx became enchanted with Trémaux the conventional view is that he was trying to find an alternative to Darwin's theory of natural selection which Marx believed relied too much on the hated theories of Malthus. For a presentation of this conventional point of view, see Richard Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Thought from Marx to Bernstein* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publication, 1999), 29-44. Finally, it is worth noting that the history of Trémaux still remains strikingly under-researched.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, "A Darwinian Gentleman at Marx's Funeral – E. Ray Lankester," *Natural History* (September 1999), available on the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins and Nelson, 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Weyl, 132.

<sup>8</sup> Paul, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Weyl, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Weyl, 133.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid..

<sup>14</sup> Weyl, 134.

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<sup>15</sup> Wilkins and Nelson, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkins and Nelson, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Paul, 122.

<sup>19</sup> On the history of the positivists and scientific materialists in France, see Joy Harvey, "Evolutionism, Transformed: Positivists and Materialists in the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* from Second Empire to Third Republic," in David Oldroyd and Ian Langham (eds), *The Wider Domain of Evolutionary Thought* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983),

<sup>20</sup> Weyl, 133.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey, 297.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 293.

<sup>23</sup> Weyl, 134.

<sup>24</sup> On Duchinski, see an essay devoted to him by Ivan Rudnytsky in his book *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History* (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1987) as well as a 1 August 1893 obituary on him in the *New York Times*. An invaluable article on Duchinski in the broader context of "Turanian" arguments about Russia, see Marlène Laruelle, "La question du 'Touranisme' des Russes. Contribution à une histoire des échanges intellectuels Allemagne – France – Russie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, » *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 45/1-2 (January-June 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Laruelle, 243.

<sup>26</sup> For a brief overview of Martin, see Charles Rearick, "Henri Martin: From Druidic Tradition to Republican Politics," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7/3-4 (July-October 1972). Although Rearick doesn't say so, given Martin's interest in establishing lay education, his important role in supporting the Republic following the Franco-Prussian War, and his interest in Druidism, he seems a likely candidate to have been active in French republican oriented freemasonry.

<sup>27</sup> Laruelle, 260.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>29</sup> MECW 11: 261-62.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 64. This is the reprint edition of the 1908 book issued by Kerr Press in Chicago.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, *Letters to Dr. Kugelmann* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Angus McLaren, "Phrenology: Medium and Message," *Journal of Modern History*, 46/1 (March 1974), 89. This article especially examines phrenology's role in artisan worker circles.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 93-4.

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<sup>35</sup> Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 127-28.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Popkin, "Pre-Adamism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Thought: 'Speculative Biology' and Racism," *Philosophia* 8/2-3 (November 1978), 225.

<sup>37</sup> Foster, 199.

<sup>38</sup> Gould, "A Darwinian Gentleman."

<sup>39</sup> Engels wrote this essay in May-June 1876 as the incomplete introduction to a work Engels was planning to be called *Die drei Grundformen der Knechtschaft* (On the Three Basic Forms of Servitude.) It was never completed. Instead Engels became involved with researching and writing *Anti-Dühring*. The essay was first posthumously published in *Neue Zeit* in 1896 and is often included in *Dialectics of Nature*.

<sup>40</sup> Derfler, 46.